

Information sheet

Differentiation. What, why, who, when and how?

There are a number of definitions of the concept/term 'differentiation'.

"Differentiation is the process of identifying and addressing the different needs, interests and abilities of all learners to give them the best possible chance of achieving their learning goals."

Standards Unit Pilot Centres, Standards Unit - *Improving differentiation in business education*, DfES 2004

"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."

J.Visser, *Differentiation and the Curriculum*, University of Birmingham, 1993

Aims of this topic

- What differentiation means.
- Why differentiation is important to the both the teacher or trainer and the learner.
- When to differentiate.
- How to differentiate.
- Some differentiation techniques.

What is differentiation?

Differentiation is the process of identifying and addressing the different needs, interests and abilities of all learners to give them the best possible chance of achieving their learning goals. (Standards Unit Pilot Centres, Standards Unit- *Improving differentiation in business education*, DfES 2004).

Why differentiate?

Every learner is an individual and has his or her own specific learning needs. Each will be influenced by previous experiences including cultural influences. Differentiation involves the art of giving each of these individuals an equal opportunity to achieve and engage in the learning process. This is why the Further Education National Training Organisation standards¹ state that teachers and trainers should:

- "select appropriate teaching techniques to accommodate the different ways individuals learn;
- use a variety of teaching methods to meet the needs of groups and individuals, and to provide an environment in which all learners have the opportunity to experience success."

¹ These have been replaced by the Lifelong Learning UK standards.

Importance to the teacher or trainer

Differentiation is important because teachers and trainers must be able to:

- determine individual need;
- plan appropriate support;
- plan sessions with the individual learner in mind;
- provide appropriate equipment, activities, handouts or learner support, enabling the individual to participate, achieve and progress;
- review and check learning in a suitable way to meet individual need; plan specific arrangements with the awarding body where there are requirements for internal and external assessment and test.

Who Differentiates?

Curriculum manager	Teacher or trainer	Specialist learner support
<p>The curriculum manager should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make arrangements for the appropriate initial and diagnostic tests and assessments • ensure that teachers or trainers have the information that they need to support individual learner's needs • that the individual learner's progress and further support needs are tracked and monitored. 	<p>The teacher or trainer has the responsibility to use information, from initial diagnostic tests and assessments and from progress made on the course, to plan to meet the individual learner's needs to ensure that they can succeed on the course.</p>	<p>There is a range of specialised test for learners with particular need. An example of this is dyslexia. Reports from a previous school or college may highlight specific support requirements or where a learner has a particular physical need. Examples include the need for a note-taker or signer for a learner with hearing impairment, or large print for a learner with sight impairment. The specialist learner support services should ensure that these facilities and services are available.</p>

Importance to the learner

Differentiation is important because it means that learners:

- feel valued;
- feel understood;
- feel able to engage with peers in sessions;
- feel equipped to learn at their own pace to reach their potential;
- feel part of the negotiated process to identify and meet their particular needs;
- feel more confident and able to achieve.

When to differentiate

- Ideally at the earliest opportunity, for example, at interview and selection.
- During induction, to follow through any concerns and confirm needs.
- During individual tutorials or review when preparing the individual learning plan (ILP).
- During regular planned follow-up tutorials or reviews to monitor progress.
- During sessions to check progress and ensure that planned sessions really do meet individual needs.
- Following a session to reflect on how well, the programme met the needs of each learner.
- Use reflection to adapt and update future sessions.

Examples of approaches to teaching sessions

It is possible to differentiate through different aspects of your teaching. For example, you can:

- differentiate when you check and review the learning process (see the Checking and reviewing learning topic);
- differentiate by your choice of teaching method (see the Managing groups topic for some ideas);
- differentiate by your use of questioning strategies (see the Questioning topic).

Methodology

Given that learners can be so different, teachers and trainers must be equipped and confident to use a variety of teaching and delivery methods during sessions, so that all learners are actively engaged.

Techniques that differentiate well.

(Remember: no method will differentiate well if it is used badly.)

Experiment/practical 'discovery style'

Learners are given a task to do, but not told how to do it. Learners plan a method, and then check this with the teacher or trainer before starting. Learners who cannot work out how to do it are given a 'recipe-style' help sheet, or help in some other way.

Learners create a handout, leaflet or poster

Learners are given a writing brief, such as "write a handout, leaflet or poster summarising what a care worker needs to know about confidentiality", and then work alone or in pairs to create it.

Buzz groups (assertive style)

Learners work in small groups for a few minutes to answer a question or complete a task. The teacher or trainer asks the groups if they have an answer, and helps those who do not or who ask for help. The teacher or trainer nominates groups to give their answers (not asking for volunteers).

Group work with individual learner responses

Learners discuss a topic, sharing their ideas. Each learner then identifies the point that they feel is the most important and explains why, giving a reasoned response.

Activity-based tasks that require learners to come to their own understanding of an issue

An example would be an activity that enables the learners to identify their own feelings about confidentiality issues in their work. This means that every learner has an individual learning experience.

Case studies

Examples of case studies can be found in 'Who are your learners?' activity. Information contained in the case studies, can be used by the learners to apply theory to practice or workplace experience.

Explaining tasks

Learners explain the key points of a session to each other at the end of that session. The teacher or trainer then gives model explanations.

Assertive questioning

Learners are asked an open question. Learners work on this individually or in pairs for one to five minutes. The teacher or trainer asks learners if they have an

answer. If they do not, help is given. The teacher or trainer nominates learners to give their answers (not asking for volunteers).

Writing task/action planning

Learners are asked to write everything that they know about a topic. They are then asked to identify what they do not know but need to know. Action is then planned with the support of the teacher or trainer.

Reflective journals

Learners consider their own performance at work or placement, and identify their strengths and areas for development. An action plan is then drawn up to facilitate self-development.

Learner presentation

Learners are given or choose a topic to explain to the group. They may work alone or in a small group to prepare, plan and deliver presentation. The teacher or trainer checks their materials and individualised advice is given before the presentation.

Formative tests and quizzes

The teacher or trainer asks questions and learners respond. Learners mark their own responses from the model answers provided. Learners establish which questions they answered wrong, and work on these. The same test/quiz is given again a day/week later, but learners complete the questions they answered incorrectly the first time.

Here are some top tips to remember about differentiation.

1. Know your individual learners well.
2. For each session, consider how your plans will benefit every learner in the group.
3. For every activity, consider how you can simplify it or how you can make it more challenging.
4. Use open-ended questions, which learners answer at their own level.
5. Reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of each session, identifying what can be improved and how.
6. Build flexibility into your session plans.
7. Remember that what works for one group may not work for another.
8. Have extension work prepared in advance.
9. Be aware of any specific learning needs within the group, for example, consider whether anybody needs coloured paper or large print.
10. Where you have learning support assistance, ensure that the person giving it contributes to plans for the session.
11. Ensure that feed back to learners is at an appropriate level and is understood.

Remember: no method will differentiate well if it is used badly.

Think about.

Your current approach to differentiation.

When do you do it?

How do you do it?

How do you integrate differentiation into your session plans and questioning strategies?

Review the methods that can differentiate well.

How does it differentiate well?

What needs to happen to ensure the method differentiates?

What could you do to make it even more effective?