Your differentiation masterclass
Practical ideas and strategies to help all students to access learning
The Teaching Compendium

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Acknowledgments

About the author

Mike Gershon is a teacher, trainer, writer and educational consultant. His teaching resources on TES Connect include The Starter Generator, The Plenary Producer and The Assessment for Learning Toolkit. Together they have been viewed and downloaded more than 2 million times by teachers in over 180 countries. Mike teaches at King Edward VI School in Bury St Edmunds. He divides his time between Suffolk, London and Yorkshire.

He is the author of six books on teaching and learning, including three bestsellers, and has a number forthcoming in 2013-2014.

How to use Assessment for Learning in the Classroom: The Complete Guide

How to use Differentiation in the Classroom: The Complete Guide

How to use Questioning in the Classroom: The Complete Guide

How to use Discussion in the Classroom: The Complete Guide

How to teach EAL Students in the Classroom: The Complete Guide

More Secondary Starters and Plenaries: Creative activities, ready-to-use in any subject
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Introduction

Differentiation is a word frequently tossed about in education. But what does it really mean?

We can define differentiation as any strategy that is used to ensure that every student is able to understand the content of the lesson and to progress in their learning, regardless of the point they started at.

This might mean offering additional support that allows students with special educational needs to access the curriculum. It can also mean providing gifted and talented students with extension work to challenge and inspire.

While it may not always be possible to meet the exact needs of each individual student in every lesson, the ideas in this booklet will help you to teach across a range of abilities and adapt the content of your lessons to best increase participation and progress. After all, differentiation applies to all students. Everyone should be given the opportunity to learn.
Section one – Basic differentiation

In this section we will look at some of the basic elements of successful differentiation. These are things that you can do in any lesson, with any age group.

1. Talk to every student

Trying to talk to every student during the course of your lesson is one of the simplest strategies to put into practice. Showing a little interest in an individual will go a long way towards encouraging a good rapport and will also allow you to elicit information that can be used to move learning forwards.

Talking to a student may involve as little as checking that they understand the work. Where a student is struggling with an activity, you have the chance to support them with further explanation, scaffolding or demonstration.

For more-able students, a one-on-one discussion offers an opportunity for you to pose challenging questions, to suggest alternative ways of looking at the material or to engage in an extended discussion about the topic of study.

2. Circulate

Although the temptation to stick close to the teacher’s desk might be strong, you should aim to circulate in every lesson. By walking around the room, you are able to observe what is going on, listen to discussions and make interventions where necessary, whether this is to help students, to challenge their thinking or to manage their behaviour.

Circulating allows you to maintain control over proceedings by exercising “soft power”. For example, if you notice that a student is going off task, you need only stand next to them and ask them a quick question about their work. Without any hint of conflict you will have directed them straight back on task.

As you move around the room, be aware of where you are looking. Keep scanning the room and try to take up positions where the whole class remains in view. This will prevent students from going off task or becoming stuck while they are out of your sight.
3. Seating plans

A seating plan is useful for more than just learning the names of your students; it is also a useful differentiation tool.

As well as indicating allocated seats, a really good seating plan will include information about your students, such as whether they are on the gifted and talented register, whether they have special educational needs or have English as an additional language. These notes will act as a reminder to yourself and a primer for anyone who might cover or observe one of your lessons.

Decisions about who sits where rely on you making judgements based on where students are at, how they engage with the learning and what support they require. For example, you may sit a student whose spoken English is weak next to a skilled speaker, or you may place a student who struggles conceptually near to your desk, making it easier for you to help them.

Think carefully about the positioning of each member of your class based on all the information you have at your disposal. Through the course of the year, you will undoubtedly need to tweak your seating plans as you grow to better understand your students and their individual needs.

4. Plan your groups

When using group work in any lesson, plan the groupings to ensure that all students make the best possible progress.

This might mean:

- Keeping certain students apart for behaviour-management reasons.
- Pairing students who are less able with those who are more able.
- Collecting certain students into a specific group in anticipation that you will work with them through the course of the task.
- Grouping students with similar ability levels and providing each group with work aimed at their level.

The key is to create groupings that will support individuals and help them to access the work. In order for groupings to be successful, each group member must understand that you expect them to work positively with one another, to cooperate and to throw themselves into the work.

To some extent, you will be relying on trial and error. Sometimes a group that looks good on paper can fail to gel in reality. Bear in mind that you may need to adjust things during lessons, or in between sessions, to ensure that you are differentiating effectively.
5. Confidence indicators

One of the difficulties we encounter in differentiation is identifying which students are most in need of our help. Confidence indicators are a great way to quickly get an idea of who could do with some support.

Here are five ways for students to show you how confident they feel:

- **Fingers:** Ask students to hold up their fingers. The number of fingers equates to how confident they are. 0 = In need of help. 5 = Fine going it alone.
- **Thumbs:** Ask students to hold up their thumbs. Thumbs up = Feeling good. Thumbs in the middle = Feeling OK, but might need help later. Thumbs down = Feeling like I need help now.
- **Traffic lights:** Give each student three cards: one red, one orange and one green. Ask pupils to display the card that represents their relative confidence through the course of the lesson. Green = Highly confident. Orange = OK, but may need help later. Red = I would like help now.
- **Books:** If your students use exercise books, ask them to shut these at the start of a task if they feel like they need help.
- **Areas:** Assign colours to certain areas in your room (eg, purple, green and blue). At the start of a task, invite students to go to the area which equates to how they feel. Purple = I would like some help on this. Blue = I feel OK, but might want to ask some questions. Green = I am happy to get on with this on my own.

Once you have ascertained who needs help, you can use your time most effectively. Alternatively, you can ask students who are confident with the work to team up with peers who are struggling.
6. Examples and modelling

While some students will understand most of what you say immediately, others will struggle to grasp abstract points or to quickly interpret the language we use in the classroom. Examples contextualise abstract ideas. By using examples in your explanations, you will be able to communicate better with those students who need a little more support.

You can also offer support by modelling tasks or actions before asking students to perform them. This could mean using your body to show how you want students to perform a movement, conducting a mock conversation to demonstrate how to engage in discussion or writing a paragraph that exemplifies the type of writing that you want students to complete.

Model work does not always have to come from the teacher. A good differentiation strategy involves reading out student work as an exemplar. When pupils are engaged in a writing task, walk around the room and read what students are producing. When you find a really good example, ask the student if you may read it aloud to the rest of the class.

As you read, draw attention to good qualities or techniques that others could incorporate into their own work. This will provide support to those who are struggling and different ideas or insights for more-able students.

7. Supplement writing with pictures

Text is not immediately comprehensible to those who struggle to read through it and decode meaning. By including pictures on your handouts or presentation slides, you will be giving students another point of reference and an alternative way into meaning.

This point is particularly relevant if you are teaching students who have English as an additional language or if your class contains learners with low literacy levels. For these students, written text may be particularly hard to interpret, perhaps even impenetrable at times.

A Google images search is a quick and easy way to find appropriate copyright-free pictures that can be copied and pasted into your resources.
8. Tap into prior knowledge

As we teach, we are always building on the existing knowledge of our students. While prior experience will vary from student to student, none of them will enter your classroom as a blank slate.

You should take advantage of this fact when differentiating. Connecting work to students’ prior experience is an excellent way to ensure that everyone can access the learning. Pre-existing understanding can shed light on complex ideas and help learners to feel more confident with new material.

Here are three simple starter activities you can use to help pupils connect new and existing knowledge:

- Ask students to make a list of everything they already know about a topic. Make this easier by allowing them to discuss their ideas in pairs before writing it down.
- Challenge students to find a link between a new idea and three things that they already know. Make this easier by presenting five or six categories students can choose from to make their connections.
- Identify something connected to the learning that you know students will be familiar with. Ask them a series of questions about this for the starter activity. Then, show them how their knowledge transfers to the topic in question.

9. Task mixture

Over the course of any unit of work, you should aim to include a range of different tasks. In doing so, you will not only ensure that your lessons have variety, you will also be offering various ways into learning and therefore playing to the strengths of different students.

Here is a list of different tasks to get you thinking about the range of options available:

- Paired discussion
- Group discussion
- Whole-class discussion
- Independent writing
- Role play
- Design tasks
- Creative writing tasks
- Poster presentations
- Activity stations
- Interviews
- Debates
- Group work
- Essay writing
Section two – Supporting less-able students

There are many reasons why a student may be working at a lower level than their peers, including special educational needs. Whatever the cause, it is likely that less-able students will be lacking the positive mindset that would enable them to achieve more. Differentiation tactics should therefore focus on supporting students in their work, but also on changing attitudes and developing confidence.

1. Sentence starters

Knowing how to begin a piece of work is the hardest part of the job for many students. Giving them the first part of a sentence to work with can remove the anxiety of the blank page and allow students to focus on the body of their work.

Here are five different ways you can share sentence starters with your students:

- Set the class off on a task and identify those who need help. Speak to these students individually and give them a sentence starter as you do.
- Display a selection of possible sentence starters on the board for the whole class to choose from.
- Create a hand-out containing a range of common sentence starters. Laminate this and give out copies to your students.
- Create a wall display with a number of different sentence starters on it. Use this to model at the beginning of tasks.
- When students are working on a task, walk around the room and read out the first sentences that have been used by more-able students. These can then act as models for other students.

2. Writing frames

A writing frame is a skeleton outline for a piece of written work. It provides the structure, leaving students to concentrate their full attention on the content of their writing.

Here are three ways you can use writing frames with your students:

- Create a handout to accompany a piece of extended writing. This should explain the purpose of the writing, who the target audience is, what needs to be covered and how the work will be assessed.
- Provide students with a guide indicating what should be written about in each paragraph. This works especially well with non-fiction writing. You might also like to signal some of the genre conventions to your pupils, such as including a summary conclusion at the end of an essay.
- Combine a writing frame with sentence starters to create a more detailed frame to offer maximum support.
3. Scaffolding

“Scaffolding” means providing students with some of what is necessary to complete a task and then leaving them to make up the difference on their own. It is about taking students so far before allowing them to succeed by themselves.

Sentence starters and writing frames are both examples of scaffolding. Here are five more examples for you to use in class:

- Showing students how to answer the first couple of questions in a series before leaving them to complete the rest.
- Discussing an idea with a student before suggesting how they might include it in their answer.
- Providing a worked example which students can refer to as they do their own work.
- Suggesting a range of possible approaches that could be used to answer a question or respond to a task.
- Providing an outline for the student to fill in.

4. Creating opportunities for success

Many less-able students are low on confidence. A great way to counter this is by creating opportunities for these students to succeed. This will help to create a more positive mindset and encourage students to have greater belief in their own abilities, making them less afraid of failure and more willing to try.

Here are three easy ways to create opportunities for success:

- Use starter activities that build on prior learning and focus on knowledge and comprehension.
- Create tasks that have stages of increasing difficulty. All students will be able to succeed in the first stages before encountering greater challenge.
- When a pupil has cracked a new skill or come to terms with a new idea, give them a chance to use it five or six times in quick succession.
5. Success audits

Another way to build confidence and increase motivation is through success audits. Create an A4 grid with two columns. The first column should be titled “Successes” and cover one-third of the page. The second column should be titled “Evidence” and cover the remaining two-thirds.

Give students a copy of this grid and ask them to record all of the successes connected to learning they have had in the last six months, both inside and outside of school. They should then write up evidence for these successes, which may be positive feedback from a teacher or greater understanding of something that they previously struggled to make sense of.

Keep these sheets and return to them through the year, asking students to add to their list of successes.

One thing to bear in mind is that students who are really low on confidence will find it difficult to even begin this task. As such, you may need to work hard to draw out examples of their successes. You might like to think of some examples or categories in advance and then use these to direct or stimulate student thinking.

6. Quickly achievable targets

One of the most effective ways to ensure progress in the classroom involves setting targets based on where students are at and where you want them to be.

For students who are unused to success and who see school as a place where they do not achieve much, you can create an experience of swift and impressive progress by setting targets that are quickly achievable.

Here is an example of five sequential targets you could set for a student, each one achievable in only a couple of lessons (the subject is history):

- Write at least two paragraphs, each one containing three keywords.
- Use two different keywords to analyse a source.
- Compare two different sources and say what makes them similar and what makes them different.
- Write a paragraph, using two different keywords, that compares two different sources.
- Compare two different sources and decide which one you think is more reliable and why.
7. Checklists

Most of us think actively about what we are doing and make decisions that are in our medium- and long-term interests. For example, a student may read through a paragraph they have just written and move on to the next one only if they are happy with what they read. Similarly, another student might think about different ways to overcome a problem they encounter, rather than giving up.

Processes of checking and self-regulation often do not come automatically to less-able learners. Instead, they may need your support to develop such skills. It is helpful to provide students with a checklist for them to check their work against prior to handing it in or deciding they are finished. Over time, students should come to internalise the checklist and will no longer need to rely on it.

Here is an example checklist for essay writing:

- Is there an introduction?
- Have you included arguments for and against?
- Have you written a conclusion?
- Do you explain your points?
- Are your points supported by examples and evidence?
- Is your writing clear?
- Have you repeated yourself?
- Have you made enough points?
- Did you challenge yourself?
8. **Breaking down effort**

Effort is an absolutely vital element of success. It is therefore essential that we help our students to become aware of what effort is and how much of it is required to do well.

A great way to do this involves breaking down any extended task into four or five elements and then asking students to self-assess the amount of effort they have put into each. Here is an example:

**Task:** Create a poster advertising the benefits of ergonomic design

**Five Elements:**
- Research ergonomic design
- Pre-design phase: trialling different ideas
- Selection and refinement of final idea
- Creation of the poster
- Development of the poster through the use of colour

This provides a framework to help students determine whether they have put in enough effort at each stage to complete the whole task to the best of their ability.

9. **Positioning**

To ensure that your less-able students are supported in every lesson, you should seat them in places that make it as easy as possible for you to provide them with the support they need.

Possibilities include:

- Next to your desk
- At the end of a row of seats
- On the front row
- To one side of the room
- In seats that have a walkway beside them

Not only does this ensure that you are always in a position to help those most likely to need assistance as quickly and easily as possible, it will allow you to help discreetly, without drawing unnecessary attention to the student in question.
Section three – Supporting more-able students

Differentiation for the more able means pushing students to think beyond the boundaries of the lesson. Strategies that focus on independent learning and intellectual risk-taking will move high achievers out of their comfort zone and help them to achieve their maximum potential.

1. Classroom responsibility

More-able students demonstrate an above-average grasp of the work and may possess more expert knowledge than their peers. As such, they are in a position to take on extra responsibility in the classroom and to use what they know to support others. You can make the most of their abilities to the benefit of less-able students, while at the same time helping them to develop leadership, problem-solving and interpersonal skills.

Three ways you can give classroom responsibility:

- Ask students who finish their work to go around and support other members of the class.
- Invite more-able students to teach the rest of the class, either individually or in groups. This could take place during the lesson or it could involve giving those students time to prepare for another lesson in advance.
- Appoint certain students as “experts”, “student teachers” or “go-to guys”. These students assume their role and the rest of the class know that they can ask them for help or support if the teacher is already occupied.
2. Intellectual responsibility

Intellectual responsibility means acknowledging that learning, thinking and developing ideas are ultimately down to us as individuals.

Given the nature of the classroom and the demands of the curriculum, it can be difficult to cultivate intellectual responsibility across the board. However, encouraging more-able students to take increasing responsibility for their own learning can be an excellent differentiation strategy.

Five ways to develop intellectual responsibility:

- Refuse to help students when they are stuck unless they can show you that they have made at least three attempts to solve the problem on their own.
- Request that students include “being original” as a success criterion by which their work will be judged.
- Give ambiguous and vague extension tasks or questions that require students to make decisions and plot a course of action in response.
- Challenge students to come up with their own extension tasks or questions that are difficult to answer.
- Ask students to imagine different ways of approaching the same material.

3. Socratic questioning

In Plato’s dialogues, Socrates is a philosopher who travels around Athens questioning its inhabitants in order to demonstrate flaws and assumptions in their thinking and thus help people to reason more clearly and to live better lives. Subsequent analysis has suggested that Socrates asked four types of question:

- **Gadfly** – questions that continually nip away at someone’s thinking
- **Stingray** – questions that shock us into seeing things differently
- **Midwife** – questions that help give birth to ideas
- **Ignoramus** – playing dumb in order to draw out ideas

You can use these question types to push the thinking of your more-able students. In addition, you can train those students so that they can engage in Socratic debates with one another. Here are some exemplar questions to get you started:

- **Gadfly**: What do you mean by that? But what if X happened? Does that always apply? Why?
- **Stingray**: Imagine that X was not the case. Then what? What if the opposite was true?
- **Midwife**: That’s an interesting idea. Could you explain it in a different way? What made you think of that idea?
- **Ignoramus**: I don’t understand. Can you start right from the beginning? So, do you mean that...?
4. Hypothetical questions

Here are two examples of hypothetical questions:

- What if gravity on Earth was the same as that on the moon?
- What if the Second World War had ended a year earlier?

Hypothetical questions invite us to consider alternatives. This makes them great for challenging students’ thinking. You can use hypothetical questions for extension tasks.

5. Philosophical problems

You can push the thinking of your more-able students by asking them to consider philosophical problems during your lessons. The six main branches of philosophy are:

- Ethics – concerned with morality and the nature of right and wrong.
- Epistemology – concerned with knowledge and what we can know.
- Aesthetics – concerned with beauty and the nature of art.
- Political philosophy – concerned with authority, power and government.
- Philosophy of religion – concerned with God and the nature of religious thought and experience.
- Metaphysics – concerned with the nature of reality.

These categories can be connected to every subject on the curriculum. With a little research, you can develop some stimulating and challenging extension tasks for your students. A simple internet search for “ethical dilemmas” will return a host of problems for you to use.
6. Wonder wall

A teaching colleague first showed me this idea. It works as follows:

Take a large sheet of sugar paper and draw a wall on it. A simple method is to take brown paper and to draw on this with white chalk or crayon, so that it looks like a brick wall. Stick this up in your room and create a title for it: The Wonder Wall.

This display is for interesting and unanswered questions that have been posed by students in your class. Every time one of these questions is put forward, invite the student who posed it to write it on a sticky note and attach it to the wonder wall.

These questions can then be used as extension tasks. When more-able students finish their work, invite them to select a question from the wonder wall and to try to answer it, either through writing or through discussion with a peer who is working at a similar level.

You might like to push things further by insisting that wonder wall questions can only be removed if they are replaced by a similarly high-quality question.

7. Self-critique

All students should be encouraged to check over any piece of work they produce before handing it in. For more-able students, it is particularly important that this process be as close, careful and in-depth as possible. Thinking critically about their own work will help these students to better understand their strengths and weaknesses and to think critically about every aspect of their work.

You might like to help students to critique their own work by providing a set of questions to guide them. For example:

- How successfully do the different sections of your work connect together?
- What decisions did you make when writing each paragraph? How could these decisions have been different?
- On what grounds can you justify the work you have produced?
- What three changes would you make to your work as a result of your close inspection?
- Where can you see weaknesses in your writing style? How might you learn from this?
8. Embracing failure

Failure is great. It’s how we learn. If you never made mistakes, you would be missing out on a lot of great learning experiences. More-able students are so used to succeeding that they often find it particularly hard to experience failure. The key is to reconceptualise failure and mistake-making as opportunities to learn.

Challenge your more-able students to embrace failure. Many will find this difficult and may even actively rebel against it at first. However, they will become better learners if they can overcome being afraid to fail.

Students can embrace failure by:

- Approaching tasks or questions in a way that is at odds with their usual approach.
- Engaging fully with a task that they would usually shy away from. For example, a student who prefers writing could try to engage with a drama task.
- Making a log of failures and mistakes, including an explanation of what they learnt as a result of each one.