

Task design

Less confident learners benefit from bite-sized, progressive tasks, where each step builds on the successful step before, but maintain challenge. More confident learners need challenge and opportunities to move at a faster pace and extend their learning. Activities and learning outcomes can be planned with these varied needs in mind.

Making time for support

Learner-led activities, which allow the teacher to become 'the guide on the side' are useful in this respect. The more autonomous the learners become, the more this frees up the teacher to observe, engage in learning conversations and get to know each learner, so that their particular support needs can be met.

Varied approaches

If teachers and learners are willing to experiment and take risks, they can develop a varied repertoire of approaches that can be mixed and matched to accommodate personal preferences and the requirements of the topic or skill being learned. In order to become expert learners, learners need to experience this variety and reflect on what works best for them in a particular situation.

Link to session plan exemplifying this

Quick start guide

Differentiation

Learner-led

Learning activities that place the learner in the driving seat will naturally lead to differentiation. Such activities allow learners to work at their own level, bringing their existing skills and knowledge into play and to move forward at their own speed. Consider how to enable learners to plan and lead sessions, for example.

Project or problem-based learning

This kind of learning opens up many opportunities for differentiation. Learners can approach the problem in a wide variety of ways and can build on their varied interests and experiences. There need be no limit on how deeply they explore the topic, allowing each learner to challenge themselves to the full.

Assessment for learning

Effective differentiation depends on this. Teachers need constant feedback on how each learner is progressing in order to plan differentiation.

Cultural diversity

Effective differentiation takes account of learners' diverse cultural backgrounds. At its simplest, this means using images and examples that reflect cultural diversity. At another level, it might mean devising activities that tap into diverse perspectives or traditions to enrich the whole learning experience.

Differentiated questioning

Careful formulation of questions, using a framework such as Bloom's taxonomy, enables learners to work at different levels of complexity. Learners can also be encouraged to think in terms of 'the question behind the task' and to formulate their own differentiated questions.

Multi-sensory

Learning that engages more than one of our senses is richer, more motivating and more likely to offer learners multiple options for taking in information and making sense of ideas.

Differentiation

Learners bring with them diverse backgrounds and experiences. For example, Jones (2006) reflects on learners' ability, prior learning, learning speed, social and cultural background, maturity and individual preferences. All approaches to differentiation are underpinned by a view of learners as individuals and some see differentiation as a philosophy guiding the whole of the learning journey. Others consider differentiation in the context of planning the content of learning sessions. Tomlinson (2001) summarises differentiation in this way:

“Differentiation allows students multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they have learned. A differentiated classroom provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively.”

The National Teaching and Learning Change Programme Adult learning resources (2006) suggest that teachers could meet individual needs by taking account of:

- learning outcomes
- variety of teaching methods
- level
- tasks
- text and/or resources
- interest
- support
- feedback.

Some models also make reference to accommodating the learning styles of learners. This area is subject to controversy, as recent research by Coffield and others (2004) throws into doubt many of the instruments used to identify learning styles. Teachers* also need to avoid stereotyping when seeking to identify individual needs and preferences.

* We use 'teaching and learning' and 'teacher' as generic terms to include:

- teaching, training and learning
- teachers, tutors, trainers, lecturers and instructors in the further education (FE) system.

As Jones (2006) notes, however, growing understanding of learning styles has opened up discussion about the learning process with learners, and encouraged teachers to reflect on the need to vary their teaching and learning strategies.

Many teachers have found that project-based or problem-based learning provides opportunities for more individualised learning programmes. This:

- accommodates different approaches to learning
- makes content more interesting and meaningful

Effective teaching and learning

- develops higher order cognitive skills, personal, learning and thinking skills, and self-management skills
- encourages learners to investigate topics more deeply and to internalise understanding
- makes connections between different subject areas and other aspects of learners' lives
- helps learners gain confidence and improve social and collaborative skills.

Whichever approach is taken, differentiation needs to be integrated to make sure that learners do not perceive it as patronising or under-valuing.

References

Coffield, F., Moseley, D., Hall, E., Ecclestone, K. (2004) *Learning styles and pedagogy in post-16 learning. A systematic and critical review*. London. Learning and Skills Research Centre.

Jones, C. (2006) *From theory to practice: using differentiation to raise levels of attainment*. Learning and Skills Network.

Tomlinson, C. A. (2001) *How to differentiate in mixed-ability classrooms*. 2nd ed. Alexandria, VA.

You will find links that exemplify co-operative learning in the National Teaching and Learning Change Programme resources.