



EDUBYTE 13, DIFFERENTIATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Many busy educators find the concept of differentiation overwhelming. This feeling is heightened when some educators have large and mixed ability classes. Pressure to finish the curriculum and time constraints often prevent educators from including differentiation in their planning and teaching.

There are a number of ways to effectively implement differentiation which may help educators and remove any feeling of stress associated with this important process.

PREPARING FOR DIFFERENTIATION

1. Effective planning

To be able to differentiate effectively, you need to commit time to planning for it. When planning, remember that there is no right way to differentiate because each class you teach will have a unique mix of learners with a variety of abilities from very capable to those who need ongoing support.

Plan for at least two levels of activity in your classroom:

- I) Activities that most learners can cope with.
- II) Additional activities related to the main activity can be made available to those who want to do more and those who want the added challenge.

Keep this process simple. Effective differentiation takes time and practice. Be flexible, and try new strategies and methods.

2. Getting to know your learners and building relationships

Take time to get to know your learners and to develop a relationship with each one of them. This will equip you to cater to each of their learning needs in a differentiated classroom. Here are some activities you can set for your class that will help you build relationships with your learners, while getting to know them better. Adapt and add to them to suit your personality and your school.

- Write a story about yourself, for example about your family and friends, or about an important person in your life.
- Develop a getting to know you question and answer worksheet. This could also be in the form of an interview, where learners interview each other.

- Ask learners to draw a self-portrait, and to write a speech that they will deliver to guests on their birthday.
- You can also set [higher order question](#) exercises throughout the year to help you assess the level of learners. Examples are:
 - What would you compare...?
 - How would you group...?
 - What would happen if...?
 - What evidence can you find...?
 - How would you test...?
 - How could you prove...?

These exercises will help you to get know your learners socially, but will also help you understand their ability. So these questions and exercises should be set at an appropriately graded level. Your assessments of these exercises will help you group learners for future tasks.

3. Assessment

Assessment is a great tool to use at the start of the year to get to know the learners. Regular assessment is necessary to help educators adapt their teaching style to best support their learners. This process will give educators valuable insight which will benefit their learners because it will shape their planning and teaching style.

DIFFERENTIATION STRATEGIES THAT CAN BE USED IN THE CLASSROOM

1. Flexible pace of lessons

Many educators expect all learners to complete work set for them in a specific period of time. This, where possible, needs to be changed to support learners who finish the task quickly and those who work at a slower pace. Learners need to be given an opportunity to complete extension activities or be given extra time should they need it. This will allow them to work at a comfortable pace.

2. Working together in groups

Group work is a wonderful way of allowing learners to collaborate with each other. Groups allow learners to assist each other and create safe spaces for shy and reluctant learners to participate. It is important that educators assign roles for each member of the group based on their strengths and ability.

Groups can be created in a number of ways.

- Create groups of learners who share similar abilities, adapt the instruction to suit the ability levels of each of these groups.
- Create groups with mixed ability learners.

- Assign the following roles to the members of the group based on what they are good at.
 - You can have a group leader, a scribe, a spokesperson and a tutor in each group.
 - Roles will need to be changed according to the needs of the task being performed.
- Always remember that group work must involve all learners and will need to be carefully monitored. Educators should be quick to intervene when it is clear that a group needs assistance.

3. Progressive tasks

List your learners according to different ability levels. Create or assign tasks that are appropriate for them to do. Learners are not physically grouped during this process but will complete a task set for them based on the educators predetermined groupings. In your planning for example, you could refer to the blue group or the green group. This approach can also take the form of a task which gradually gets more challenging. All learners receive the same task and can work at their own pace while allowing some learners to tackle more challenging work quicker.

Examples of a progressive task: Literacy

- Match words from a text with definitions. (all learners)
- Answer questions from the text. These questions should be graded and get progressively more challenging. (all learners)
- Ask learners to identify fact and opinion in the story. (optional)
- Ask learners to describe alternative endings to the story. (optional)

When setting new tasks, educators can design some questions or activities that require more than just a right or wrong answer. These questions and tasks should allow for skills such as interpretation.

This will create an opportunity for all learners to complete tasks that match their level of understanding and ability. This approach also provides valuable insight for the educator into their learners' level of understanding and ability. And can also be used as a form of assessment.

In conclusion it is important to accept that this process can be overwhelming, but it is important to keep these strategies in mind while planning and teaching and implement the most relevant ones where possible. This will help to enhance your teaching and the learning occurring in the classroom.

This is an open source educational resource drafted by Social Innovations mentor Roger McIver. It draws from the sources listed below. For more EduBytes visit www.socialinnovations.co.za

www.promethianworld.com

www.teachertoolkit.com

www.resilienteducator.com