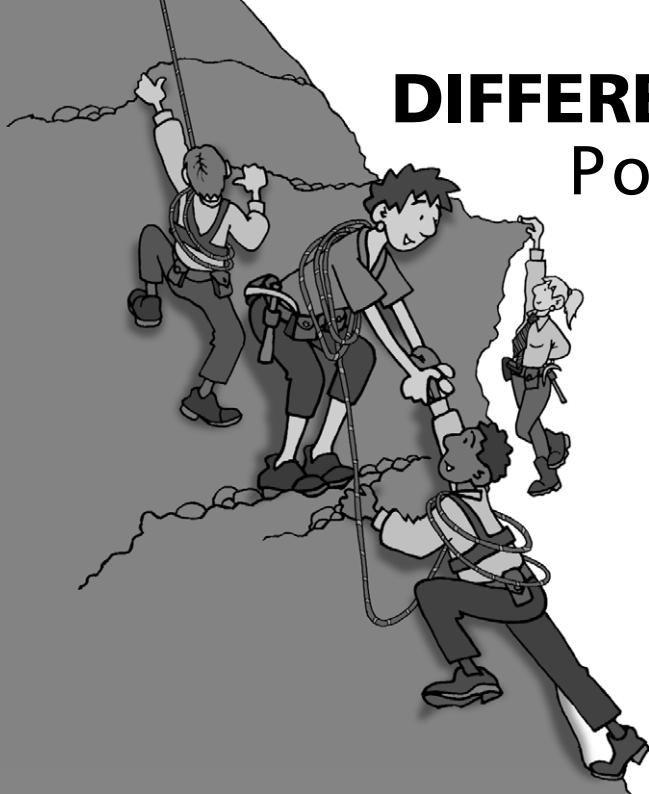


DIFFERENTIATION

Pocketbook

By Peter Anstee

Cartoons:
Phil Hailstone



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A definition – or two



The dictionary reveals two relevant definitions of the word *differentiate*:

- To distinguish or show the difference between
- To make different by alteration or modification

The second sense will have more resonance with teachers – differentiation is, in essence: **modifying a lesson or parts of it for one, some or all of the learners.**

The first sense is also pertinent to education. Much as the markings on animals help us to tell them apart, we can differentiate between students on the basis of their prior attainment, learning preferences, target grade, skills, special needs, etc. Modern teachers and schools have a great deal of knowledge about their charges and are highly adept at differentiating *between* students (identifying the differences between them). However, it is so much more significant when we differentiate *for* students (modify classroom provision to accommodate them).

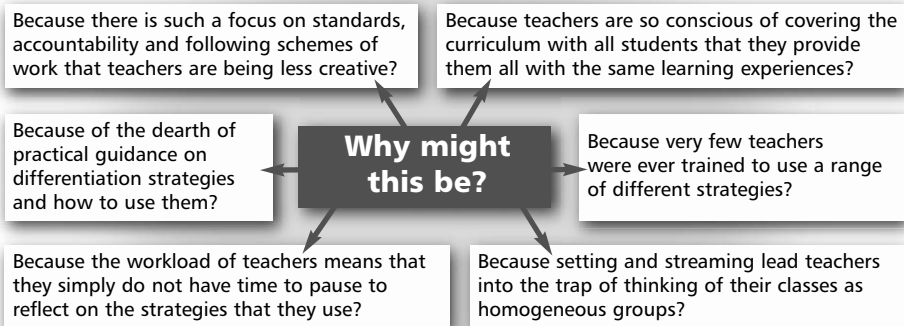
The 'distinguishing' information is useful, but true differentiation should **enable**, not **label**.

Why does differentiation matter?



Differentiation matters because children and their learning matter. Few teachers would disagree with this; yet (according to inspection reports and academic research) well planned and effective differentiation remains remarkably elusive.

Why might this be?



But don't believe everything you read ...



...There are many, many classrooms where differentiation is commonplace.

Enter many primary classrooms to find a highly sophisticated form of organised chaos. Students with a wide range of skills, often from different year groups, are undertaking varied tasks. They work individually, in pairs or in groups; they access help when they need it; once finished they begin the next task.

Enter many secondary classrooms to find exemplary practice where students negotiate individual tasks, where diverse group work strategies involve all learners in ways that suit their aptitudes and needs; where resources are adapted to support and challenge different learners and where assessment informs individual target setting.

These students are not squeezed into a 'one size fits all' mould. They are **active participants** in their learning with the teacher as leader, not instructor.

The benefits



Smooth-running lessons that accommodate a wide range of individual needs require planning, the kind of creative, student-focused planning that reminds you why you became a teacher in the first place. Just as motivated, inspired students complete work more quickly and to a higher standard, teachers who liberate themselves to plan creatively experience the buzz that only teaching can bring.

The reward lies in focusing on students and their learning, the best ways in which to engage them and get the best from them, ...and then seeing their response. The teacher ceases to be a deliverer of content and behaviour manager and becomes a **facilitator** and **guide** in students' learning.

And with that come:

- ✓ Better student motivation
- ✓ Better student behaviour
- ✓ Greater progress

**Quality
learning**

Each child is different; each learner is different



Learners come to us with different:

- Life experiences
- Language skills
- Talents
- Attitudes
- Learning skills
- Confidence levels
- Prior knowledge
- Commitment
- Ways of learning
- Degrees of home support
- Social skills
- Likes and dislikes

Thus, students have different starting points and different skills in relation to a task and will learn in varied styles and at varied paces.

Differentiation aims to take account of these differences and provide the best way forward for each child.



Progress



Any judgement of the quality of teaching is based on **individual students** making appropriate progress, ie on **learners learning**.

Providing the same for every student cannot achieve this.

Effective provision must build from the point where each student currently is and help them to move towards where they could be.

Thus, to engage, motivate and get the best from each student, **differentiation is at the core of good teaching**.

Flow



Psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi used the term 'flow' to indicate the state we can reach, in any aspect of life, where we become absorbed in a challenging task and our progress brings personal fulfilment and the motivation to continue to a new challenge and further progress.

In education, this occurs where the **level of challenge** for an individual student is balanced with them possessing the **right skills** and receiving **appropriate support** to meet that challenge successfully. This maximises learning, or creates 'flow', since as Csikszentmihalyi writes:

When goals are clear, feedback relevant, and challenges and skills are in balance, attention becomes ordered and fully invested.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: *Finding Flow* (1997)



About the author



Peter Anstee



Peter has taught in comprehensive schools in Essex for over 15 years. Having led a highly successful English Faculty in his current school for 7 years, he was then given whole school responsibility for improving the achievement of the more able and for leading on the development of teaching and learning.

Peter has run training courses on fast-tracking and on ICT in English. He has led whole-school INSET sessions in every school he has worked in, on subjects including underachievement in Year 8, independent learning, student motivation and differentiation.