DAVID DIDAU
4: DIFFERENTIATION

THIS ESSENTIAL TEACHING SKILL IS ALL ABOUT HIGH EXPECTATIONS AND THE ART OF MARKING MISTAKES, SAYS DAVID DIDAU...

Differentiation is one of the darkest arts in teaching. The generally accepted position is that it is wholly good; which it may be, but it's also bloody hard work. And my bottom line is this: any policy predicated on the idea that teachers should work harder is doomed to failure.

Thankfully, Ofsted agrees: *"It is unrealistic ... for inspectors to necessarily expect that all work in all lessons is always matched to the specific needs of each individual."*

Yes, every class is a mixed ability one, teeming with unique and wonderful examples of studentship – but does this mean we have to flay ourselves producing individual lesson plans for all the uniquely different little blighters we teach? Like many of the slippery terms used in education, differentiation can mean all sorts of things depending on who's talking and in what context. Is it coping with difference? Learning for all? Success for all? As the landscape's changed over the past few years, there's an increasing consensus that 'success' *should* be differentiated: our examination system demands winners and losers. The idea that differentiation just means we're all different and so should be treated as such is bland to the point of meaninglessness.

So, let me offer my own definition of differentiation: *Getting all pupils to do something they find really hard.* Increasingly, I see our job as being not to make work easy, but to make it as difficult as possible and to ensure pupils will make mistakes. Without mistakes, feedback is useless and no improvement can occur. Mistakes are the very stuff of learning; If your pupils aren't making them, you're not doing your job.

Consider this example:
The chemical symbol for lead is Pb.
*What's the chemical symbol for lead?*

Of course it's a caricature, but like all caricatures there's enough truth in it for us to recognise something naggingly familiar. This is how we're encouraged to teach, and it's designed to minimise mistakes. There's no real progress in answering a question to which you've just been taught. This then is an example of the low expectations we should try to avoid.

Pupils should be expected to get over the same bar, but will need different ladders. Effective differentiation aims to start with an end point and plan how to get all pupils there. This depends on three things:
- routines and relationships
- explicit modelling and scaffolding
- marking.

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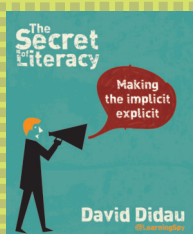
Routines and Relationships
The better your students know what to expect and the better you know your students, the better your ability to differentiate will be. Routines need embedding. Spending time and effort teaching pupils how to enter the room, present work, respond to questions etc. may seem trivial, but this is groundwork for everything else. When routines are established, relationships can grow. But just knowing their preferences and idiosyncrasies is not enough; you should also know the data. This much is, I think, obvious.

Explicit modelling and scaffolding
One sure-fire way to demonstrate low expectations is to rely on success criteria: they are little more than a terrible checklist of low expectations. If we want students to produce high quality work, we will need to provide them with exemplars to deconstruct and commit time to modelling the meta-cognitive processes an expert engages in. Year after year, I've watched Wimbledon without getting any better at tennis. How can this be? Unfortunately, we don't learn well from watching experts. I only started to get better at tennis after taking lessons and having the processes broken down so that I could recognise and understand what I should be doing. If we fail to model exacting standards, pupils will fail to achieve them.

Scaffolding is the art of knowing what a student is capable of and then supporting him to do something beyond his current capabilities. The trick is remove the scaffolding as quickly as possible so that pupils don't become reliant on it. This is the problem with writing frames; the scaffolding is hard to remove. The most straightforward approach is to provide the scaffolding at the point of speech. For reasons that are mysterious to me, students are able to write what they can say. If we prompt them to 'speak like an essay' they'll be able to write like an essay.

Marking is differentiation
I'm convinced that marking is the most effective way to differentiate. Seeing what mistakes students have made and then giving them specific feedback which they are directed to act on in lesson time is the only sane way to ensure that pupils do have work matched to their specific needs. And proofreading is an important part of this process. If you've embedded the routine that if work isn't proofread it isn't marked, then pupils will become skilled at spotting their mistakes – the ones they spot themselves are the ones they're most likely to learn from.

And so that is how I think we should best approach differentiation. Not as a back-breaking exercise in producing teetering piles of pointless paperwork, but instead, by having consistently high expectations of every student we teach, regardless of their ability – and by encouraging them to make, and learn from, their mistakes.