

DIFFERENTIATION: GIVING EVERY STUDENT A FAIR GO

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No child's best is the same as another's; we know that not all boys can achieve the same results in the world of academics or business or sport or on the stage. So how can we give each child a fair go and help them develop their personal best?

In the sporting arena athletes can articulate whether they have achieved a personal best, and good coaches modify the training to strengthen the athlete's weaknesses and further develop their strengths. Athletes can talk about their effort and how they are working to improve their personal best whilst working towards a specific goal or meet.

So why is it that our students can't do the same in world of academics?

Enabling students to achieve personal bests in the academic world.

Differentiated curriculum has become one of the buzz words in schools at present. But what does this really mean?

It means planning for the different needs of students in the classroom with the goal to maximise the learning growth of each student, or the personal best (Tomlinson, 2001). In the past it was seen as an individual programme for each student and an impossible task. However, times have changed and it is now understood that differentiation planning for the different learning needs of an individual can be done by grouping students with those who need a similar level of instruction (Robinson, A., Shore, B., and Enerson, D.L (2007).

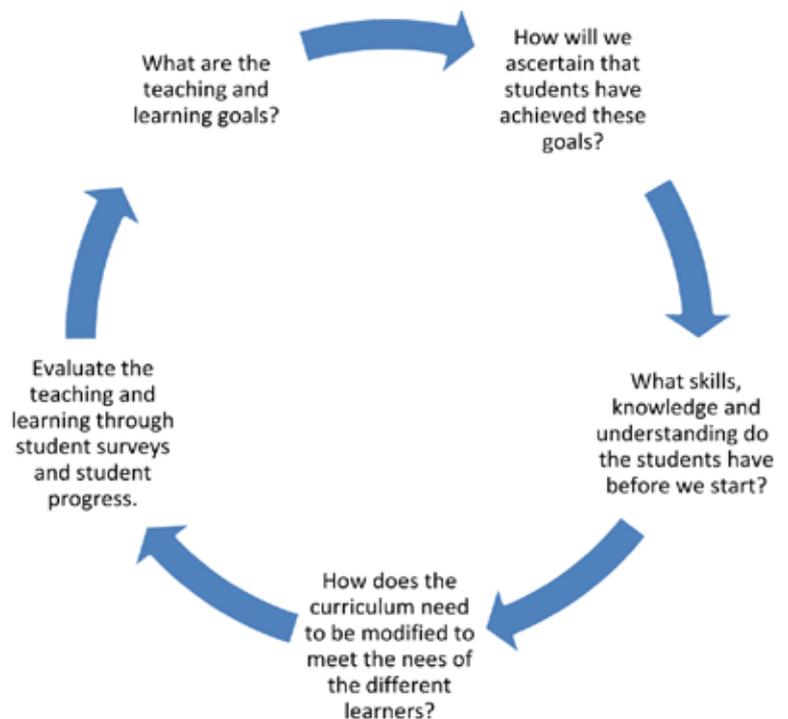
Many teachers differentiate curriculum for different learners as they go, and many can do a great job of this. However, what this approach lacks is an emphasis on the learning goals for the particular students in the class. It is hard to encourage the personal best if we don't make the learning for the individuals. It means that their individual needs may not have been considered and their progress toward the intended goal may not have been the main factor in the modification of the teaching and learning activities.

What are the goals of a differentiated curriculum?

The goal for the teacher is to ensure that each student progresses in the various areas of study. With this in mind this means that teachers are planning the teaching and learning programme with more than the end of year exams and assessments in mind, they are planning for enhanced student progress. They are planning teaching and learning based on what they know about these learners, based on pre-testing and their professional judgement.

How does a teacher plan for the needs of different learners?

In order to plan appropriate teaching and learning strategies for different learners we must first start with what we want the students to know, be able to do and understand. Whether you call this backward



by design (Mc Tighe and Wiggins, 2005) or teaching for understanding or you use the IB framework, this approach is essential for teaching in any subject area. The next step is to ascertain the current level of student skill and understanding of the curriculum. It is then that we modify curriculum for the different skill level and understanding in the classroom.

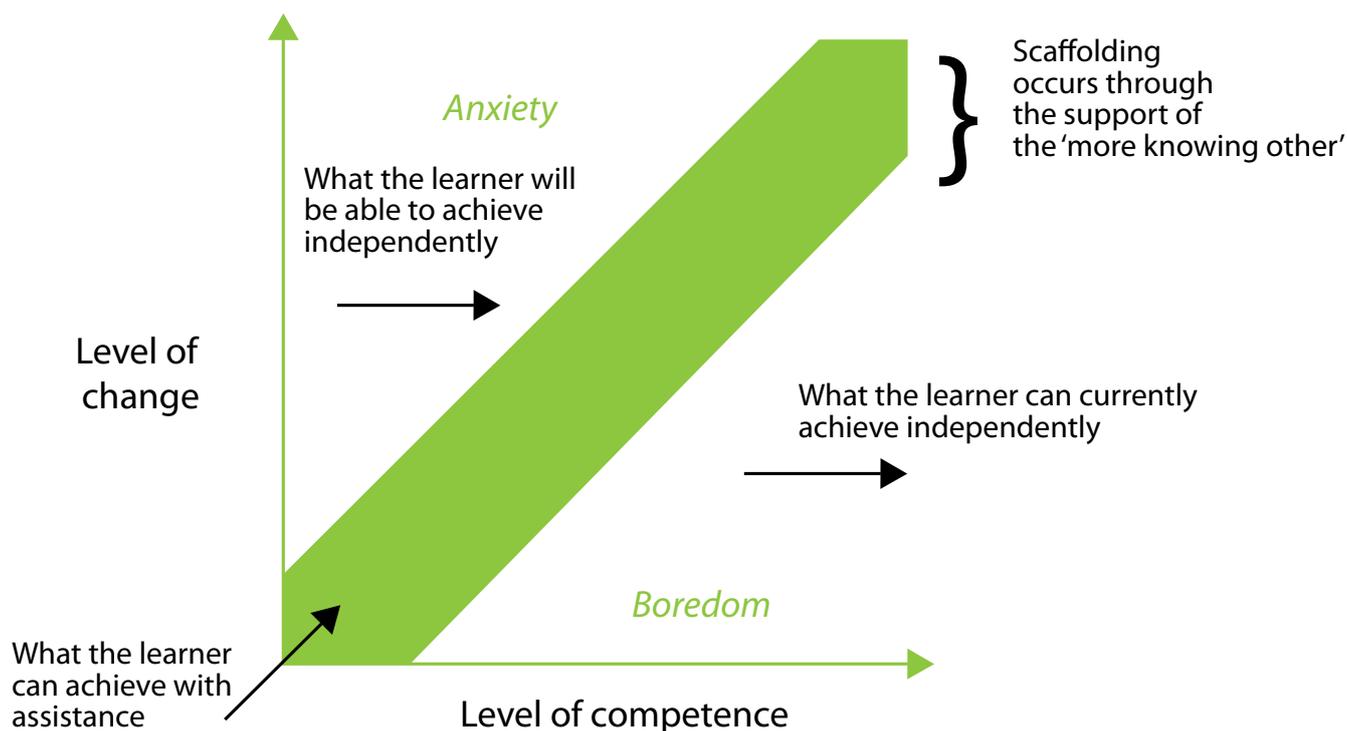
What aspects of curriculum can be differentiated?

Differentiation may involve a wide variety of strategies. Teachers will respond to the needs of different learners in ways that suit their subject, the needs of the student and their own particular teaching style. In order to differentiate we may consider examining whether the CONTENT needs modification, whether it may be more appropriate to modify the PROCESS or thinking about the content or whether modification of the PRODUCT is more suitable for the context. However, the tasks must be meaningful, involve ongoing assessment of a student's readiness and use flexible grouping practices (Tomlinson, 1999).

At Trinity we are trying to approach differentiation in a manner that enables teachers to retain their independence, allow teachers to use their professional judgement while trying to ensure a common approach to the outcomes of the teaching and learning programmes.



Zone of proximal development Focused teaching



How can we think about modifying curriculum for different learners?

When modifying the curriculum we can think about the complexity of a task. For students who struggle, tasks need to be less complex and students need to be given incremental steps to support their access to the learning task. For students who need extension, tasks need to be more complex and require higher order thinking.

Another simple way to think about differentiation is to modify the level of abstraction within a task. For students who may struggle, the more concrete a task the more likely they are to be able to access that task. For students needing extension, increasing the abstraction of the task will increase the difficulty of the task without necessarily increasing the workload for students unnecessarily.

Can students do different tasks and still get what they need?

Absolutely, in fact students get more when they do exactly the same thing. It means they can make the next step in the learning process and are more likely to retain the learning than if the task is too hard or not challenging enough.

How does this ensure that everyone gets a fair go?

This is an important question if we are to funnel students through the same matriculation process at the end of their formal schooling. Perhaps then it is important to consider how to we ensure that students are given the best opportunity to develop the skills they need for such a task. If we consider this, then differentiation makes sense.

We know that we learn best when in the **zone of proximal development** (Vygotsky, 1978), the zone where the tasks are a little out of our reach but not so far out of reach that we have no way of achieving them.

If this is the essence of learning, then finding out where the learner is on the learning continuum is essential if we want to further that child's development. This means that if we believe that all children have the right to develop as much of their potential as possible, then we must ascertain their current level of understanding and modify the learning to take them to the next step so that they can begin to build their skills and achieve a personal best, a truly fair go.

So where to from here?

For each faculty and staff member, differentiation will look different. However, the basic tenets will be embedded:

- Pre-testing tasks
- Post-testing matching the pre-testing task to measure learning gain
- Layered tasks- support, core and extended tasks
- Higher order thinking
- Creative divergent thinking and problem solving
- Clear articulation of student attainment, or marks and learning, student progress.

Perhaps we could look at the differentiation process in terms of a personal best. Where are we now, where do we want to be, what are our strengths in this area and what do we need to do to improve and develop our skills? This is not something done over a week or term but something that takes time and will constantly be reviewed. Just as athletes are never complacent with their results, they keep striving till they retire, we as educators have to constantly evaluate our progress to ensure that we are providing students with the opportunity to achieve their personal best because we are doing ours.

References

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