Chapter 8
Differentiation Done the Lazy Way

As you have probably come to expect by now, the Lazy Way means that you should not worry about differentiation as something else to do. Outstanding teaching is all about differentiation. Which means this whole book is about differentiation and shouldn’t really merit its own chapter.

Or so it would seem.

I have always been intrigued by differentiation, not least as it was portrayed during my teaching training as a ‘controlled substance’, dispensed by those with qualified teacher status to those identified as being in need. Yet despite the d-word being bandied about on PGCE courses, in the Training and Development Agency professional standards and by Ofsted, very rarely will anyone talk about how to actually differentiate. And when they do so, it seems to involve thirty lesson plans for thirty people — which obviously is not the reason you picked up this book.

It therefore makes sense to include a chapter on it so, at the very least, we can build a bridge between knowing we should be doing it and wanting to know how to do it. Then it will be your turn to take the lead and say to anyone who cares to observe your new lazy ways, ‘I had just the right amount of differentiation in that lesson.’

So let’s put this controlled substance under the Lazy Way microscope and reveal the rules of lazy differentiation.
Lazy Ways to differentiate your learning environment

Displays

Have a variety of exhibits including student work that change regularly. Use pupils to design and put up the displays.

Plants

Have plants on display that are looked after by the students. Tomato plants are cheap (and could be bought with a class collection or donation) and provide a fascinating learning tool as well as a sense of belonging. Remember to give the plants names. In my experience, it helps to keep them alive!

Get outside

Use the spaces outside the classroom. Some students will learn better outside. Ever heard someone standing in the rain justifying their job by saying, ‘Doesn’t matter about the weather, I could never work inside’? I wonder how they felt about school?

Seating plan

Have a seating plan to provide consistency as well as a variety of seating options from single desks to group desks to provide choice.
Differentiation Done the Lazy Way

Whilst furniture should be moved around, it is reassuring to have a base.

Sit on …

Vary the style of seating in your room from time to time. Some people will work better on the floor, some a bean bag, some a chair. It is unlikely that thirty identical chairs will be matched by thirty identically shaped students. Sometimes take away the furniture or use it to let the students build structures in the lesson. From medieval castles, to chambers of the heart to parts of a production line, the humble table and chair might just help the penny drop for some of your students.

Are you a hot or a cold thing?

Your room will invariably have warmer and cooler parts to it. If not create some and make these obvious to the students. Some will thrive on a bit of warmth, others including your tomato plant will wilt. You will notice a tremendous change in approach and attitude when you get this right.

I wonder

Improve curiosity and intrigue by collecting weird and wonderful items to put on your desk or shelf. Awe and wonder can engage the most reluctant learners. I have seen a bendable Elvis, dancing flowers and even a duck that chooses volunteers all seamlessly used to get students thinking. Remember to change your props regularly, as familiarity breeds contempt, even with ducks. The laziest way to do this is to ask students to look out for things they could bring in.
Rights and responsibilities

Always have written, pictorial and verbal expectations of how the environment is going to be respected through a mutually agreed charter.

Lazy Ways to differentiate the task

You do it

Give the students both the confidence and encouragement to design the task for you. Sounds simple enough, but how many times does it happen? If you tell them that they need to set a challenging task - they will pitch it just right. If there is some key learning or a skill you think you need to cover, make this explicit in your brief to the class so the students can build it into their work. They cannot guess what is in your head.

Blooms

Vary the progression, number and style of questions that you use in the classroom. Use Bloom's Taxonomy to ensure appropriate challenge for all. You could even have a differentiated copy of the taxonomy on the wall so students can begin to expect the questions you might be asking. If they know what is coming they can start to prepare and take away some of the fear of learning.
The high jump

This is another idea that came from a student who could not understand why, in maths, he had to do ten examples of a sum when after a couple it was quite clear he could do it. He suggested allowing students to use the 'high jump' approach – that is to say they can start the challenge just before you think it is going to get too difficult for them. I totally agree. There is no point in students completing work (that needs marking or assessing) that has proved nothing, other than the fact that it is too easy or too hard.

Not me!

Make it clear where they can seek help other than from you. Without that direction is it no surprise the hands shoot up straight away?

For this you have ...

Two minutes, ten minutes, an hour, thirty seconds. If you vary the time allowed for a task you will vary the nature of the learning that goes on. You might want rapid fire quantity over quality or you might want creative deep thinking. Either way set an appropriate time limit to foster a sense of urgency. Just when they get used to the amounts of time you tend to give certain tasks, change it all around. A debate about who is going to be jettisoned from a hot air balloon is suddenly done in sixty seconds and ten types of vegetable (that no one else will name) can take sixty minutes!
The Lazy Teacher's Handbook

Too much text

Think carefully about what actually needs to be written onto a resource or worksheet. Too much text poses an unnecessary challenge for some learners. You might just be better off explaining it (and recording your explanation so it can be played back whenever the learner needs reminding).

Start simple - finish clever I

In your lessons progress from concrete to abstract - in other words have a low access point leading to a high challenge. For example, in a maths lesson you might start by asking, 'What is half of four?' but finish with 'What is half of love?' Delivered the other way round and you will have chaos and confusion.

Start simple - finish clever II

Use simple, open stimulus questions to generate a discussion rather than wading in with the heavy hitters. For example, 'What do you do on a Friday?' whilst seemingly dull can explode into lots of different areas when the student gives you a response to work with. You could quite easily be having a discussion about culture, religion, family or jobs with your students in seconds. The difference is that this way round you have given them a non-threatening way in using language and a concept they can understand.
Matching learners

Think about how groups can be constructed, as different combinations will spark off each other differently (and for lots of reasons). For one task pitch friends against each other and then use them next time to cooperate. The same old people, in the same old team, around the same old table will give you the same old results. Just look at your senior leadership team.

How would you help yourself?

Ask students, in an appropriate way, what it is that is needed to help them learn better. You might not get an instant response as, to be fair, who will ever have sat them down and explained what could be on offer? A Lazy Teacher would because just like they cannot guess what is in your head, you cannot guess what is in their head either.

Lazy Ways to differentiate the launch of your learning

The review panel

Ask selected students to preview forthcoming tasks and make amendments to your resources and lesson plan that they think would make it clearer for the class. When they have fed back, surprise them and truly follow the Lazy Way by telling them that as they understand it fully, they can now launch the lesson!
Variety is the spice of life learning

Offer a variety of ways in which students can produce work for you. Does it have to be written or the dreaded poster again? If you are unsure of the format of the suggestions the students make ask them how and by whom the work can be assessed and marked.

Modelling

If appropriate, or indeed possible, model how the task might look at different stages – be it content or process. This might be something that you can build up for the next time students are learning about the topic but more often than not you will have a pioneer group that is always a little bit ahead.

Camera, lights, action

Think what could be recorded in audio or visual form in order that students could have access to the instructions at a later point in the lesson. It will save you repeating yourself and means students can access help as and when they want it without bothering you.

Know your data

Just for clarity’s sake, I do not mean just the Scholastic Assessment Test, Cognitive Ability Test, Fisher Family Trust or teacher-assessed levels. I mean passions, ambitions, dreams and inspirations (and if they haven’t got this then help them to generate it). Use all the information about your learners’ prior achievements and backgrounds to build a picture of your class. If you have three-quarters of the rugby team and half the hockey team in your class you
might, on occasions, want to give your learning a sporty contextual setting. Could they study speed, time and distance by looking at the location of rugby grounds or the venues for the Olympics?

It may be you have a class which loves performing, or animals, or food. Build this into your planning and their learning. If learners can believe it, they can learn it. Using real places, real people and real passions creates scenarios that will stimulate students’ interests, meaning they can be motivated to push their own boundaries. Result – one of the hardest jobs is done for you. How lovely and lazy is that?

Having thought about your room, the task design and how you will launch the task (if indeed it is you who will launch it) there is one final piece of the differentiation jigsaw – high expectations for every single member of that class. By ignoring student reputations and demanding high expectations you are achieving two more goals without any preparation whatsoever.

Firstly, you are being refreshingly different in not perpetuating the label that a student or a class may carry. After all, how many people does it take to tell us we are a little overweight before we become very self-conscious? Behaviour is not far behind. Continually telling someone they are poorly behaved will lead to poor behaviour. Fortunately the opposite can be used to great effect. Contagious, meaningful and relentless (but justified) praise can be equally as powerful.

Secondly, you are being dismissive of some of the barriers that will have appeared in their lives. Albeit hard to pin down where they come from, barriers pop up that prevent students from thinking they can do something. Boys excelling at ballet? Girls studying engineering or manufacturing? Of course they all can. And they do. The common theme that such rare success stories have is that the young people have been encouraged by someone who has set high expectations and will not buy into the idea of limiting barriers.

Differentiation is not about running around the classroom with different worksheets typed in a variety of different fonts with the
odd word missing. It is so much more - much of which requires no effort from you. Share the different strategies you are using with the students themselves, be explicit about the process of learning and insist on feedback about which strategies are working.

After all, why would you want to waste Sundays developing differentiated lesson plans and resources that are not going to benefit your students?