

Differentiated Instruction



In Literacy and Basic Skills Programs

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Introduction

Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs have been buffeted by change – the introduction of a new curriculum framework, EOIS-CaMS, performance management, and the list goes on. In this paper, we will take a moment to get back to the heart of LBS programming: teaching adults how to improve their skills.

For years, LBS programs have been defined as client-centred. No two adult learners are the same. As a result, the application of differentiated instruction to LBS classrooms, small groups and one-to-one tutoring matches is critical to working effectively with adult learners.

Differentiated Instruction Defined

What is differentiated instruction? The following definition has been taken from Wikipedia and altered slightly to reflect adult learning:

Differentiated instruction and assessment (also known as differentiated learning or, in education, simply, differentiation) is a framework or philosophy for effective teaching that involves providing different students with different avenues to learning (often in the same classroom) in terms of: acquiring content; processing, constructing, or making sense of ideas; and developing teaching materials and assessment measures so that all students within a classroom can learn effectively, regardless of differences in ability.

Students vary in culture, socioeconomic status, language, gender, motivation, ability/disability, personal interests and more, and practitioners must be aware of these varieties as they plan curriculum. By considering varied learning needs, practitioners can develop personalized instruction so that all adults can learn effectively.

Differentiated instruction is not about making tasks easier; it's about making them possible. The goal is to create learning opportunities that make allowances for differences in how individual students learn in order to ensure equal access to important academic content.

It's important to note that differentiated instruction is not the same as individualized instruction. Every student is not learning something different; they are all learning the same thing, but in different ways. Differentiating instruction is presenting the same task in different ways and at different levels, so that all learners can approach it in their own ways.

The application of differentiated instruction is often described as “Meeting learners where they are” and building on learners’ strengths. When we consider adult learners who come to adult literacy programs, we can see the importance of meeting learners where they are, as many of these learners may have spent years in a formal schooling situation where they were expected to fit the learning activities and

methods that were presented to them. The idea that a practitioner might adjust learning activities in a way that suits learners may not be very familiar!

3 Reasons to Differentiate Instruction

Research suggests there are three main areas to consider in differentiated instruction: readiness, interest and learning profile. We'll explore each of these areas a bit further below.

Readiness

Learner readiness refers to how prepared or ready the learner is to do the learning. You can also look at learner motivation as part of learner readiness. Here is an thought-provoking description of motivation: "Motivation is the product of expectancy (Can I do it?) and value (Is this worth doing?)" This rather simple description hits upon two pillars that support Literacy and Basic Skills programming. One is learner self-esteem. LBS programs have a key role to play in assisting LBS learners in increasing their self-esteem – certainly in the realm of learning. The second pillar is context and how important it is for the content used in adult literacy instruction to be relevant to learner goals and interests.

Something to Ponder:

Have you ever asked adult learners in your program if the materials used in your program are motivating?

Interest

Common sense would suggest that learners are more motivated to learn what interests them. But in the midst of all the data collection that LBS programs have to do on the front end of a learner's stay in a program, you might ask yourself where and how you deliberately discuss learners' interests. If learners ARE asked about their interests, how is this information actually used in the development of a learner's training plan? What is your program's capacity to respond to various interests that might be expressed by adult learners?

If it's been a while since you've had an opportunity to ask yourself (or staff or volunteers in your program) these questions, it might be a good idea to do so.

Learning Profile

Most, if not all, LBS programs likely have tools on hand to assess learners' learning styles. After all, it's important not only for practitioners to have information on learners' learning styles, but also for the learners, themselves, to understand how they learn, what their strengths are and why they might have difficulty absorbing information when it's presented in certain ways.

Again, if your program uses a specific learning style inventory or tool, do you know why that particular one is used? Has it been used for a long time? Are there other tools, perhaps new and improved tools, that provide additional insight into learning styles and preferences?

All of these concepts – learner readiness, learner interest and learning profiles – play a role in differentiated instruction. In the next section of this report, we will review the various methods for differentiating instruction.

Methods to Differentiate

Now that we have discussed what differentiated instruction is, as well as three reasons why differentiated instruction is important, we'll look at four ways in which practitioners can differentiate instruction.

Content: Practitioners can modify or change the content that is presented to learners. We know that learners are at different levels. The LBS system in Ontario has a variety of learning content that has been written for learners who are at various levels.

Question: When was the last time new content was brought into your program and to the attention of practitioners and volunteers?

Process: This is the area where learning styles figure predominantly as process refers to how learners make sense of the content being taught. If a learner is strongly visual, is information being presented in a way that will enable that learner to process the information?

Question: What can practitioners do to present information related to different learning styles?

Product: The Literacy and Basic Skills field has looked at learner product – or the way(s) in which learners demonstrate their knowledge – in different ways over the years. Practitioners who have been in the field for a few years may recall different terms, such as learning outcomes and demonstrations. Now, of course, we are using milestones and, to a lesser degree, culminating tasks, to show when learners have mastered content.

Question: In addition to the completion of milestones and culminating tasks, which document some of the larger achievements or gains in adult literacy programs, what other methods – perhaps, more day-to-day methods – does your program use to demonstrate learner knowledge?

Affect: Here, we are defining “affect” as the feelings and attitudes that affect learning. Part of providing differentiated instruction means that practitioners are also taking into account adult learners’ feelings and attitudes related to learning. For example, some learners, especially those who may have had negative experiences earlier in life with school and learning, will benefit from personalized, individual feedback.

Question: What methods does your program/staff use to provide individualized feedback to learners on their progress? Do these methods work? How do you know?

Small Groups

Using differentiated instruction in one-to-one tutoring arrangements is ideal. You can base all of your learning materials and your approaches to learning on that one individual's preferences. However, the sole use of the one-to-one methodology is not practical or possible for all LBS programs and sectors. In this section of the report, we will focus on the potential use(s) of a small group model for providing differentiated instruction.

There has been an increasing trend in LBS over the years to integrate or initiate small group instruction in LBS programming. There could be several reasons for this trend. Some practitioners note that they have moved to small group instruction to increase the number of clients they can serve. Other practitioners cite the use of small group instruction assists them in bridging clients from one-to-one tutoring to classroom instruction. Yet others identify that small groups are most practical for delivering short-term, targeted programming. Whatever the reason(s), small group instruction has become more prevalent in adult literacy instruction in Ontario. Alongside these trends that have been observed in the field, there is also a growing body of practice-based literature that documents the experiences of adult literacy and basic education programs that have used the small group approach.

According to the literature, a move in adult literacy towards small groups has emerged:

- out of a desire to provide a learning environment that is more learner centred and collaborative
- because small groups better reflect the contexts in which adults generally use literacy skills
- to incorporate personal experiences into adult literacy development

Advantages

Advantages that have been associated with small group instruction include:

- Allows for integration of critical thinking and other language processes
- Enables learners to expand their repertoire of learning strategies as they watch and potentially model the learning of others
- Breaks down isolation and stigma frequently experienced by adults with lower levels of literacy
- Promotes peer support
- Enhances learners' self-esteem by helping them understand they have much to offer as a result of their experiences
- Expands access to social resources
- Makes the distinction between practitioner and student less obvious – creates a cooperative, participatory environment that is less hierarchical

Note: In focus groups with job seekers, participants have frequently noted the value they derive from having the opportunity to talk to others who are in the same position as them. They develop a support network that means a lot to them.

Disadvantages

On the flip side, here are some disadvantages that have been connected to small group instruction:

- Challenging for practitioners and teachers to accommodate the wide range of needs and abilities in a small group
- Small group work requires more preparation time (estimated it is double) than preparing for 1:1 tutoring
- Practitioners and teachers need group leadership skills as well as teaching skills
- Some learners are just not comfortable with group participation

Many adult literacy practitioners can identify with these points. And there may not be a lot (or any) preparation time for some practitioners. However, adult literacy program managers are encouraged to think about the potential advantages of small group instruction and to manage resources to enable practitioners to adequately prepare to meet the diverse needs of adult learners.

Given that small groups are increasingly becoming part of the LBS delivery landscape, the next two sections of the report identify what makes a small group effective and implementation considerations.

What Makes a Small Group Effective?

Your adult literacy program may already use small groups. Whether it does or does not, here are some tips for how to make a small group effective. It is suggested that small groups be:

- learner-centred
- experiential – incorporate learners’ experiences, skills and ideas
- cooperative – promote working together
- participatory – promote self-awareness and self-advocacy

Implementation Considerations

Simply having small groups will not in and of itself lead to successful differentiated instruction. If you are considering moving towards the integration of small group instruction, give thought to:

- selecting and training leaders
- assigning learners to groups
- choosing materials
- assessing learner progress
- requiring a greater variety of instructional materials
- requiring varied assessment methods such as:
 - Sustained silent reading in which the learner keeps track of rate of speed
 - Portfolio of writing that permits the student to see progress
 - Student-developed checklists, charts or graphs for plotting successful uses of literacy

Note: Does your program involve adult learners in developing/conducting assessments? What are the pros of such an approach? What are the cons?

Small Group Combinations

If you are already using small groups or feel ready to adopt a small group approach, there are more options available than just combining a group of 6-10 individuals. If you only have 6-10 individuals, that is fine, but if you have more, you may wish to consider combining them in different ways to see how things work. The following are some examples of small group combinations:

- Learners work with like-readiness peers (learners who are all similarly ready to learn)
- Mixed-readiness peers (learners at different stages of readiness to learn)
- Learners with similar interests
- Learners with different interests
- Learners with similar learning styles
- Sometimes random groupings

The examples above are encouraged. If you have the ability (due to numbers or interests) to create different groupings, then by all means, do so! Such combinations will result in favourable outcomes for adult learners because they will have the opportunity to see themselves in more than one context.

Learning Centres

Learning centres have also been recommended as a method of creating differentiated instruction. Learning centres are stations that contain a variety of materials where learners can explore topics or practice skills on their own. How might the integration of learning stations work in an adult literacy classroom? Would it be feasible or desirable to create a learning station that is focused on employment? Or financial literacy?

The literature around differentiated instruction often identifies choice as an essential ingredient for learner success. Having multiple learning centres in an adult literacy classroom can promote or increase choices for adult literacy students.

The role of choice – how much choice is given to adult learners in the course of regular programming?
Could this be a topic to discuss at a staff meeting?

Tracking Learner Progress

Also integral to the successful implementation of differentiated instruction is the ability to track learner progress. After all, practitioners need a tracking system that will enable them to know which objectives learners have mastered. Of course, in LBS, we already have individualized learning plans. Creating individualized learning plans for every learner can be challenging, but equally, if not more challenging, is updating learning plans on a regular basis to reflect learner achievements and the accomplishment of goals.

What system does your program use to ensure that learner progress is tracked in an efficient and meaningful way?

Does It Work?

If an adult literacy program is going to invest in exploring differentiated instruction, will it be worth the investment?

Over the years, there has been a lot of discussion around what percentage of adult learners in adult literacy programs are impacted by learning disabilities – either officially diagnosed or undiagnosed. Many practitioners state that at least half of their clients are impacted by learning disabilities and some say the percentage is as high as 80%. The deliberate incorporation of differentiated instruction could bode well for learners with learning disabilities.

According to one source, “Compared with the general student population, students with mild or severe learning disabilities received more benefits from differentiated and intensive support, especially when the differentiation was delivered in small groups or with targeted instruction.”

So, it appears as though differentiated instruction would be beneficial to adult literacy students, and not only those with learning disabilities. Research suggests that the use of differentiated instruction has also been favourably linked to improved decoding, phonemic and comprehension skills.

“Baumgartner, Lipowski, and Rush (2003) studied a program to improve reading achievement among elementary and middle school students using differentiated instructional strategies, including flexible grouping, student choice of learning tasks, self-selected reading time, and access to a variety of texts. In all three of the classrooms in the study, the targeted students improved their decoding, phonemic, and comprehension skills. Student attitudes about reading and their own abilities also improved.”

Professionalism and Differentiated Instruction

Once an LBS program decides that it wants to pursue differentiated instruction, what are the steps required to implement it? It is recommended that the managers and decision-makers within the program first develop a solid understanding of differentiated instruction. Once this has been achieved, further recommendations include:

- nurturing different teaching models
- encouraging teachers to apply differentiation with flexibility, creativity and choice
- providing teachers with high-quality professional development and time to collaborate, plan, and implement differentiation.

The Literacy and Basic Skills field is not regulated when it comes to credentials, but it is well known that good teachers and practitioners are attentive to learners’ varied learning needs. The deliberate adoption of differentiated instruction increases practitioner professionalism. As one writer notes, “to differentiate instruction, then, is to become a more competent, creative, and professional educator.”

Conclusion

The concept of differentiated instruction is not new to many LBS practitioners. Many LBS programs have adopted differentiated instruction for years, but perhaps have never described it as such. The purpose of this paper has been primarily to highlight the role that differentiated instruction can and should play in LBS programs, as these programs work to address the extremely varied levels and needs of adult learners.

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