A Differentiated Approach to Historical Inquiry

How to motivate and engage students through differentiation in historical inquiry

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How can teachers meet the diverse needs of students in inclusive classrooms? How can they cater for students who differ in their cognitive ability, physical ability – or disability, levels of motivation and engagement, attention span and personal interests? Classrooms have always included students with diverse learning needs and teachers have always sought to cater for some of these diverse abilities. While practices such as ability grouping and providing students with different levelled texts can be useful, the most effective way to meet the diverse needs of students is through differentiation.

Differentiation is featured in Standard 1.5 of the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*:

> Differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities.[1]

This standard has increased teacher awareness of their need to demonstrate evidence of effective differentiation, but it doesn't address what differentiation may look like in practice or how teachers can incorporate it into their classrooms. This article aims to provide primary school teachers with some suggestions for how to provide differentiated learning, based on inquiry-based pedagogy in the primary history curriculum, including:

- using pre-assessment to inform planning to proactively cater for diversity
- matching instruction, activities and resources to students' readiness
- building in student choice
- using flexible grouping
- removing barriers to learning
- capitalising on student interest
- allowing students to work in different ways.

Criteria for Differentiation

The basic principle underlying differentiation is that all students can be catered for effectively in regular classes. The most commonly cited author in this field, Carol Ann Tomlinson, proposes that teachers differentiate learning by modifying and adapting ***content*** (curriculum); ***process***

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(how students access and learn the content); ***product*** (how students demonstrate what they have learnt) and ***learning environment***.[2] She suggests that teachers should plan these elements of differentiation by drawing upon their knowledge of their students in three key aspects: readiness, interests and learning profiles.[3]

Readiness

In the context of differentiation, 'readiness' refers to a student's knowledge and understanding (as determined through pre-testing) of upcoming content. It does not refer to a student's general ability, but rather is a measure of a student's prior knowledge and exposure to the content.

Determining Readiness with Pre-tests

Pre-tests identify what students already know. Without a pre-test, teachers begin instruction at a random point that may not match or meet the readiness levels of many students. This can lead to off-task behaviour or a lack of motivation and engagement. For example, students whose pre-test results indicate a high level of knowledge and understanding for the upcoming content may not need to participate in the introductory teaching or initial activities. Instead, they could be provided with the opportunity to work at their own pace and begin work on an activity to extend and challenge their knowledge and understanding.

It is useful for teachers to reflect on how they administer pre-tests and what they require students to do. Does the pre-test exclude some students from demonstrating what they really know? For example, does the wording of the pre-test (and the level of vocabulary and comprehension required) exclude some students from answering the question? Does it allow all students to truly demonstrate the extent of what they already know? If you give a multiple-choice or cloze pre-test (where students fill in the missing word in a sentence), students with a lot of knowledge and understanding cannot demonstrate the full extent of their knowledge. Instead, consider pre-tests with open-ended questions such as:

> Tell me (*in writing, through drawing or verbally*) everything you know or have heard about (*the olden days, the First Fleet, the Gold Rush or Federation*).

An open-ended question like this will provide a more accurate picture of what each student knows and understands.

Learning Profiles

Students have preferences for how they work and learn, and it is important to provide activities that acknowledge and consider these preferences. Some students prefer to work in quiet spaces, while others learn better when they can talk to their peers to ask questions and share ideas. Other students are more comfortable, and therefore more efficient, if they sit on a beanbag or stand up while they are working. Depending on the activity, students may prefer to work in pairs or small groups, or individually. Teachers don't need to give students choice of how to work and learn in every lesson, but should consider opportunities where it may be helpful to offer choice to increase student motivation, engagement, efficiency and quality of work.

Assessment Considerations

Consider the purpose and aim of a piece of assessment. Is it assessing students' comprehension ability and written communication skills, or their knowledge and understanding of the historical content or inquiry skills?

If the aim of the assessment is to assess historical content, then it doesn't matter how students demonstrate this knowledge in the assessment.

Consider whether you could offer students the option of using assistive technology (such as speech-to-text software) to increase their opportunities to demonstrate what they truly know, rather than what they can communicate in a specified format or medium. If you have some students who

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1 Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership, Teacher Professional Standards (AITSL: Sydney, 2011), www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/standards.

2 Carol Ann Tomlinson, *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of all Learners*, 2nd edition (Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD, 2014).

3 See the article by Wouter Smets later in this issue that explores these topics.

dislike writing, you might increase their engagement and improve the quality of their work by allowing them to use text-to-speech software. Consider students in your class who may be learning English or have a language-based difficulty or disability. When students can demonstrate their learning and understanding in a variety of ways, including using assistive technology, they can demonstrate what they truly know and understand.

Interests

It is important for teachers to know their students' interests, both general (e.g. gaming, sport, animals) and specific (Minecraft, gymnastics, horses). By knowing students' interests, teachers can:

- make relevant connections between student interests and subject content where relevant
- select appropriate resources which may increase student engagement.

Inquiry and Differentiation within the History Curriculum

Differentiation is an inclusive practice that aims to accommodate the diverse needs, interests and learning profiles of students while addressing the essential content of the curriculum. The Australian Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) curriculum is underpinned by inquiry-based pedagogy.[4] Although a specific model of inquiry is not identified in the curriculum, the 'Inquiry and skills' strand content descriptions present a broad inquiry cycle of questioning, researching, analysing, evaluating and reflecting, and communicating. An effective inquiry generally includes the following elements:

- generating student curiosity with a strong hook, stimulus, or provocation
- providing opportunities for students to ask questions
- support students to locate relevant and appropriate sources and explicitly teach them how to critically analyse sources for authenticity, accuracy and relevance
- offering support and guidance as students seek answers to their questions, including analysing sources
- allowing time for students to make conclusions
- providing opportunities for students to communicate their findings.

Guided or Open Inquiry

The stages of an inquiry are usually similar, regardless of the specific inquiry model. However, there are different levels of teacher and student input, depending on whether the inquiry is 'guided,' 'open' or somewhere in-between along the inquiry continuum.[5] The appropriate level of teacher guidance depends on student age,

4 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *The Australian Curriculum: HASS* (ACARA: Sydney, n.d.), www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/humanities-and-social-sciences/hass/.

5 National Research Council, *Inquiry and the National Science Education Standards: A Guide for Teaching and Learning* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2000).

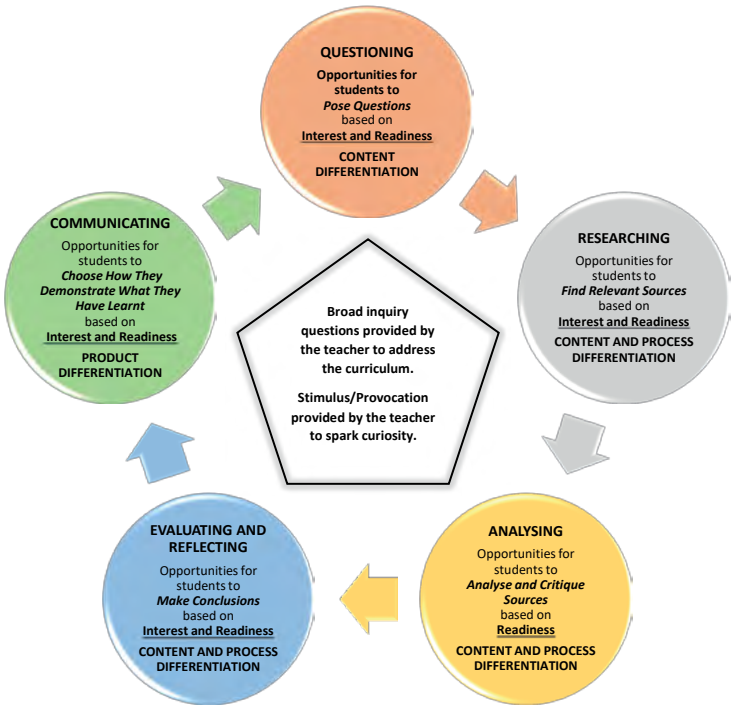
skills and previous experience with inquiry, and the time and resources available. An open, student-directed inquiry may be difficult for young students or those with little prior exposure or explicit teaching of inquiry skills, so teachers may choose to use a guided approach to inquiry-based teaching while they develop these skills in their students.

In primary schools, guided inquiries are probably the most common form. The teacher might begin the inquiry by posing a broad question which addresses the specific curriculum, then invite students to pose their own questions.[6] Alternatively, the teacher could start with a hook or provocation to stimulate student curiosity, then pose a broad key inquiry question and invite students to ask their own questions. Initially posing a broad question, and then asking for student questions, helps make the inquiry topic manageable from the teacher's point of view while also allowing students to incorporate their own interests.[7]

An effective inquiry still includes elements of explicit teaching of skills, such as drawing an accurate timeline or explicitly teaching students how to identify elements of bias in historical texts. Ideally, however, an inquiry will be driven by student questions and interests, within the confines of the curriculum. As some key scholars have pointed out, 'in an inquiry-based approach to learning, questions of wonderment become the driving force in designing the what and how of instruction.'[8] Inquiries can be short or long, depending on the content, time available, student interests and their motivation and engagement.

Inquiry-Based Differentiation

Inquiry-based learning is a manageable framework for differentiation. Both differentiation and inquiry accommodate diverse student interests (e.g. by students posing and answering their own questions) and encourage access to different resources that cater for individual readiness and



» Opportunities for differentiation in an historical inquiry

interests, while still addressing the same curriculum. Teachers can incorporate differentiation into the curriculum by:

- providing students with opportunities to pose and answer their own questions
- offering more student choice
- providing a variety of materials and sources
- capitalising on student interest
- being flexible with how students work and demonstrate what they have learnt.

Inquiry-based learning enables students to choose the focus of their inquiry, the sources that they use, the way that they learn the content and how they present what they have learnt. It enables differentiation of :

- content (the curriculum focus)
- process (how students learn the content)
- product (how students demonstrate what they have learnt).
- The diagram above provides a graphic representation of these elements.

Effective inquiry-based learning capitalises on student interests, both broad and

6 Mandy Lupton, 'Inquiry pedagogy and the Australian Curriculum,' *Primary and Middle Years Educator* 11: 2 (2013): 23–29.

7 Lupton, 'Inquiry pedagogy and the Australian Curriculum.'

8 Rosemary Murray, Mary Shea, Brian Shea & Rebecca Harlin, 'Issues in Education: Avoiding the One-Size-Fits-All Curriculum: Textsets, Inquiry, and Differentiating Instruction,' *Childhood Education* 81:1 (2004), 33–35: 33.

specific. Children are naturally curious and with the right hook, stimulus, or provocation, we can harness their curiosity and provide them with the opportunity to pursue answers to their questions. When students are engaged, they become more motivated, which is an integral part of an effective inquiry. When teachers know their students' interests, they can stimulate curiosity and generate genuine interest by choosing suitable starting points for an inquiry, based on the relevant curriculum. Inquiry-based learning provides a platform for teachers to provide open-ended or guided investigations which allow students to work at their readiness level. The teacher can then guide, support and scaffold students' learning throughout the inquiry as needed.

Choices for Differentiation

If teachers make all of the decisions in the classroom – which text to use, which video to watch, how students work or who they work with – it can stifle student motivation and academic achievement. Teachers can provide choice and flexibility while still meeting the curriculum requirements. When offering students a choice of which activities to complete, it is important that each task should be interesting, authentic and have an element of challenge – what Tomlinson calls 'respectful tasks.'[9] When students are provided with respectful tasks, they can all be engaged to work within their readiness level.

Building-in student choice is a key element of making differentiation manageable. Providing students with choice can increase their engagement and motivation. However, it is important to emphasise that teachers still make choices where necessary and appropriate, and they can still guide and mentor those students who are making poor choices to make better choices in the future. As Tomlinson has pointed out:

> Key motivators for learning are a voice in the choice of topics, work that is personally meaningful, and a feeling of ownership of the task at hand.[10]

Differentiation Strategies

Although there is no prescriptive list of instructional strategies to use for differentiation, choice boards/tic-tac-toes, menus and tiering are popular approaches.[11]

Another approach, which will be explored in detail in the rest of this article, is the RAFT (Role, Audience, Format, Topic) strategy.

Differentiation Choices

Activity	Domain	Aspect(s)
Which question they want to ask	Content	Interest and readiness
Which activities to complete	Process	Interest and readiness
What pace they work at	Process	Readiness
Which resources to use	Content and process	Interest and readiness
How they demonstrate what they have learnt	Product	Interest, readiness and learning profile
Who they work with	Process	Interest and learning profile
How they work (e.g. sitting at desk, using flexible furniture, wearing headphones)	Process and learning environment	Learning profile
Which assistive/adaptive technology they use	Process	Readiness

9 Tomlinson, *The Differentiated Classroom*.

10 Tomlinson, Carol Ann, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*, 3rd edition (Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD, 2017), 95.

11 On menus, see Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction*; on tiering, see Diane Heacox, *Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom: How to Reach and Teach All Learners* (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 2012).

Sample Project: Year 4 History Narrative about the First Fleet

Relevant HASS and English Content Descriptions

Stories of the First Fleet, including reasons for the journey, who travelled to Australia, and their experiences following arrival. (ACHASSK085)

Communicating: present ideas, findings and conclusions in texts and modes that incorporate digital and non-digital representations and discipline-specific terms. (ACHASSI082)

Plan, draft and publish imaginative, informative and persuasive texts containing key information and supporting details for a widening range of audience, demonstrating increasing control over text structures and language features. (ACELY1694).

Source: ACARA, *The Australian Curriculum*

The sample project uses RAFT to differentiate a creative writing task that addresses the 'Stories of the First Fleet' element of the Year 4 History curriculum.

The First Fleet history narrative project models differentiated inquiry. It relates to Year 4 HASS in the Australian Curriculum, focusing on content relating to the First Fleet and incorporating communication skills. It could readily be adapted to the requirements of other history curricula.

Even small changes can be effective in accommodating student differences. An example is providing students with a variety of texts when studying a particular element of the History curriculum. For example, in Year 4 the History curriculum focuses on First Contacts, so teachers could allow students to choose from relevant texts such as *Tom Appleby, Convict Boy* by Jackie French, *The Little Wooden Horse* or *Beth: The Story of a Child Convict*, both by Mark Wilson, or *My Name is Lizzie Flynn* by Claire Saxby and illustrated by Lizzy Newcomb. Each of these stories addresses the curriculum content while accommodating students with different reading and comprehension levels. The texts also cater for different student interests, with two concentrating on girls, two on boys, and *The Little Wooden Horse* specifically focusing on siblings.

Teachers will often ask, 'What if the student chooses poorly? Some of my students would definitely choose the book that they perceive to be the easiest or shortest, especially some of the boys who are reluctant readers.' As teachers, we know students sometimes make poor decisions, whether it's about who they work with or how they behave. However, it is important that they are allowed to make these decisions so they can learn from them and (hopefully) make better choices next time.

If a student is making what you consider to be a poor choice, you might talk to them about why another option may be better for them. Although some students may not choose wisely, providing choice does generally lead to students becoming more interested, engaged and motivated, and this usually minimises some of the off-task behaviour from disengaged students.

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Choosing and engaging with a specific text, as suggested above, can be accompanied by explicit teaching of relevant concepts which develop historical thinking, such as significance, perspectives and empathy. Students then need time to research,

» » The 'First Fleet' project. The assignment can be downloaded as a Word document at www.htav.asn.au/curriculum/2019/agora-2019-2-inclusion-and-differentiation.

analyse, critique and evaluate relevant sources, and an opportunity to demonstrate evidence of what they have learnt.

RAFT Grid for Summative Assessment

A RAFT grid is an effective way to set a summative task (product) that provides students with some choice in how to demonstrate what they have learnt. The strategy takes its name from the different categories included in the grid:

R Role

A Audience

F Format

T Topic

The grid features different writing prompts for students to choose from, so it differentiates through student interest.[12] There are no rules about how many options teachers provide for students. To get students interested and engaged in the writing task, teachers can consider students' readiness levels and interests when planning each prompt within the RAFT. Choices provided to students could be tiered (horizontally) in readiness level or challenge.[13] However, the writing task is already catering for readiness levels, because students will only write within their own readiness level.

To ensure that no option looks easy or boring to students, each option should be interesting and include elements of challenge. Teachers can also include 'Student choice' as an option in some spaces in the grid, to allow students to negotiate an element with the teacher. RAFT writing prompts can be used with students of any age and to address any element of the History curriculum.

Assessment Criteria

Assessment criteria should be broad so students have flexibility in how they demonstrate what they have learnt. The rubric in the sample assignment includes deliberately broad criteria so each student's writing sample can be assessed using the one rubric, regardless of the writing task they choose.

Criteria can be the same across the different prompts as long as the curriculum content and writing genre are the same.[14] In the First Fleet assignment, each writing task requires a narrative but the roles, audience and topic differ. These options provide students with choices to capitalise on their interest. Readiness levels are accommodated as there are no ceilings on what students can achieve, as long as they meet the minimum requirements outlined in the rubric. Student interest in this flexible writing task is likely to be much higher than when there is one writing task for all students.

Conclusion

This article has provided an overview of differentiated learning and specifically of its application to historical inquiry. Differentiation, as an inclusive practice, provides a framework for removing barriers to learning and increasing opportunities for success for all students. When teachers capitalise on student curiosity and allow student questions to drive a differentiated historical inquiry, teachers can:

> Create a magic garden of learning (the classroom), where each flower (the learner) blooms (develops to fullest potential) beautifully.[15]

12 Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction*.

13 Heacox, *Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom*.

14 Carol Ann Tomlinson and Tonya R. Moon, *Assessment and Student Success in a Differentiated Classroom* (Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD, 2013).

15 Rosemary Murray, Mary Shea, Brian Shea and Rebecca Harlin, 'Issues in Education,' 35.

First Fleet Narrative Assignment

Imagine that today's technology was available during the time that the First Fleet set sail from Portsmouth. Your task is to write a narrative from a particular person's point of view. The narrative should provide details of the person's journey from Portsmouth, including interactions with other passengers and experiences with the Aboriginal people upon arrival.

Role	Audience	Format	Topic
12-year-old convict	Best friend in England	Picture book or comic strip	It's so hot here.
16-year-old convict	Parent(s)	Email or short story	You wouldn't believe the journey!
Convict guard	Student choice (family, friend, former employer)	Student choice	I hope that I can keep the colony under control in these conditions.
Journalist	English newspaper	Newspaper article	The journey, first contact and the first week.

Choose one of the writing roles and create a narrative that addresses the relevant audience, format and topic. Check the rubric to make sure that your narrative includes the required information:

- factual details (e.g. dates, significant people, the ship's name)
- evidence of your knowledge and understanding of passenger experiences:
    - before leaving home
    - on a ship of the First Fleet
    - upon arrival in Australia.

Remember that you are writing from the point of view of your chosen character role (e.g. 12-year-old convict, convict guard), so use the first person (I, we). Your narrative should combine facts from primary and secondary sources with your own imagination, including what you have learnt about this topic from reading historical fiction. Think about the book that you read and its structure, and how it included facts as well as other details which were created by the writer to make the story more interesting for the reader.

Assessment Rubric

	Not yet	Good job	Well done	Outstanding
The narrative must include: • **factual** details (e.g. dates, a significant person, the ship's name).	You did not include enough factual detail in your narrative.	You included some relevant factual details in your narrative.	You included many relevant factual details in your narrative.	You included many relevant and interesting factual details in your narrative.
The narrative must include details about: • the **settings** (Britain, the ship and Australia) • the **events and the character's experiences** from leaving home to their arrival in Australia.	You did not include enough information or detail to make your narrative believable.	Your narrative included some basic details of the settings, events and character's experiences from leaving home to their arrival in Australia.	Your narrative included details which accurately captured the settings, events and character's experiences from leaving home to their arrival in Australia.	Your narrative included many relevant and interesting details which accurately captured the settings, events and character's experiences from leaving home to their arrival in Australia.
Student feedback				

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