PRACTICE 8:
Task difficulty

Optimising Task Difficulty

Optimising task difficulty can increase motivation and academic success for students while reducing the likelihood of inappropriate behaviour. To select instructional materials or tasks at the appropriate level of difficulty, consider three aspects: the student, the materials, and the task.

Tasks can often be adjusted in three ways:

1. Length of the task or the time frame allotted
2. Mode of input or response
3. Extent of instruction or practice provided

A mismatch between a task and a student's current skill level can trigger inappropriate behaviour. Research shows that when work is too difficult or requires significant use of weak or developing skills, it often results in disengagement and increased problem behaviour (SCOTT ET AL., 2012). By adjusting task difficulty, more students are likely to attempt tasks and experience success.

Getting started

Step 1: Adjust task length or time

Sometimes, learning tasks match a student's ability, but the assignment length exceeds their motivation or ability to concentrate. By decreasing the overall task length and offering periodic breaks, problem behaviour may be reduced (DUNLAP ET AL., 1991). The table below outlines some options to help modify task length and time.

Time	Length
• Have shorter work periods with other tasks between • Provide physical breaks between challenging tasks • Provide alternative times for the work to be completed • Extend the due date	• Shorten the assignment, allowing the student to demonstrate mastery with fewer items • Highlight, in colour, the tasks/problems the student is to complete • Break the project into shorter tasks; put fewer tasks/problems on a page • Have the student cover all items except the one they are working on at the time

Step 2: Adjust response mode

Sometimes, the response mode required to complete a task can trigger inappropriate behaviour. For example, reading or fine motor challenges can make reading or writing tasks seem overwhelming. Providing an alternative mode (e.g., computer, voice memo, or paired student reading) can remove these triggers, allowing the student to experience success and develop skills. The table below outlines some options to help modify response modes.

Writing	Reading
• Provide a choice between written and oral answers • Let the student dictate responses to the teacher, an assistant or a peer • Create guided notes to minimise writing	• Include illustrations on worksheets that depict how to complete tasks • Highlight or underline important words in instructions and texts • Assign a partner to share the reading requirements and help the student with unfamiliar words

Step 3: Increase instruction and practise

Some students may use inappropriate behaviour to avoid tasks they perceive as too difficult. While adjusting tasks and instruction may be necessary, it is important to address the underlying skill requirements. This often involves providing opportunities for extra instruction and practice.

The most appropriate way to provide extra instruction and practice varies depending on the student's current stage of skill development. Different approaches may be suitable as students progress from skill acquisition to fluency building, and then to mastery or generalisation.

TIPS

Increasing instruction or practice

Acquisition
- Use different instructional strategies; represent concepts in different ways.
- Arrange extra, brief instructional sessions using modelling, guided practice and independent practice.

Fluency building
- Arrange for a peer tutor to help with guided opportunities to practise.
- Have students work with partners (e.g., the partner displays flash cards to increase reading fluency).

Mastery/Generalisation
- Use meaningful real-life examples to practise and apply skills.
- Look for opportunities to work with the student to identify real-life examples; this can be an effective way to connect with the student and validate their thoughts.

Self-assessment:
Task Difficulty

Self-assessment feature	In place	Partially in place	Not in place
I intentionally plan lessons to include strategies that address task difficulty and align with student(s) ability and needs: • time expectations or assignment length • mode of responding • increased instruction, guided practice, independent practice.			
When I plan lessons, I consider the pace and sequencing that are appropriate, practical and doable to promote each student's success.			