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Differentiated Storytelling: From Focused Observation to Strategic Teaching

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Each of your students is a born storyteller, shaping the raw data of everyday experience into stories that give meaning to life. In *Story Proof: The Science behind the Startling Power of Story* (2007), Kendall Haven, an accomplished storyteller and scientist, summarizes the biological, psychological, and cognitive roots of story reading and storytelling. Apparently we are predisposed to shape our experiences as stories, a narrative process that is both unconscious and continuous. As we order events, we construct narrative models that, in turn, shape our understanding of new experiences (Haven 2007, 38–40). Even very young children use story elements to understand their world, the self, and the actions of others (Hardcastle 2003, Bruner 1990). In fact, every culture's core stories ascribe motives and goals to characters' behavior (Pinker 1997). This shaping of experience goes beyond just sequencing events; we are driven to *explain* the characters' intentions, struggles, and conflicts because stories are only relevant and memorable if the characters are compelling, their motivations meaningful. "If we can't detect that some order exist in a narrative, we tend to discount and ignore the source material" (Haven 2007, 34). Thus, without shape and significance, we find stories "lifeless."

The authors in this issue demonstrate the value of storytelling in elementary school. Their experiences, personal observations, reflections, and judgments are supported by the research that Haven presents on storytelling's power to enhance comprehension, strategy development, thinking skills, and content-area knowledge. But, if "story" is how *all* minds process experience and storytelling's impact on learning is incontestable, then isn't storytelling just as relevant for older students and core high school disciplines? If we agree that storytelling has a place in middle and high school, then you can shape storytelling to academic goals by differentiating your instruction.

Differentiated teaching focuses on the student—the varying needs, interests and abilities in your classroom—in order to design curriculum which results in student understanding through application (Tomlinson & McTighe 2006). "Storytelling *and* differentiation?" you ask. "Surely you couldn't have picked two more difficult modifications to implement in the upper grades!" Fortunately you have help. While not written for librarians, you'll find practical guidance in Kathie Nunley's *Differentiating the High School Classroom* (2006). It confronts the "yes, but" language we hear from our own internal naysayer and from our faculty ("I have too much content to cover," "I can't grade all those assignments," "I don't know how to measure my students' learning styles," "I want my classroom under control," etc.) and provides solution strategies to overcome the language of obstacles. Of course, you'll have to think about how you teach and how each student learns, but that's something that you are already doing. Some differentiation implementations are little more than tweaks, but if you are ambitious, differentiation modifications can require substantial time and effort (see chart on page 10). The good news is that you have permission to make modifications on the basis of your own readiness, needs, abilities, talents, and interests—your own personal and professional form of differentiation. Whatever you choose, the rewards for students are extraordinary. Let's take a look at the design cycle for improving literacy through storytelling.

Start with assessment. If you are already doing a storytelling unit or if you would like to plan one, an easy-

to-manage differentiated assessment strategy is "concept-attainment." Essentially, this begins with a classroom discussion in which the essential attributes of a folktale are identified by distinguishing between examples and nonexamples. Later, when students perform for each other, each student completes a concept analysis matrix identifying the critical attributes present in that tale. This serves as an assessment of how well they understand the concept. Detailed instructions about how and why to use concept attainment or other research-based strategies are found in *The Strategic Teacher* (Silver, Strong, and Perini 2007, 97–106), another indispensable resource for school librarians who want to use evidence to inform their instruction.

Diagnostic observation. Let's look at Maria, a tween who reads *Ranger Rick* as she walks between classes. She detours by the 500s as she enters or leaves the library, and every library research project she works on seems to involve using the Discovery Channel website. The science teacher has confided that Maria contributes enthusiastically to science class only when an episode of NOVA, her favorite television program, relates to the discussion. During lunch duty, the school librarian has seen Maria's peers both fascinated and repelled by her "tooth and fang" dramas on the eating behaviors of various animals. Maria's ease in reading expository text assures her competence in most subjects, except in English, where the teacher describes her as laconic and unmotivated.

Design and implement differentiation. For the Marias of a school, the hurdle is to have them recognize that narrative structures are also meaningful and relevant. Sure, we can suggest that she select an animal folktale for the storytelling unit, but differentiation is more than tailoring content to her interest. By modifying our standard storytelling instructions—differentiating the process—we can address her reading deficit. If Maria can infuse her story with vivid naturalistic details and draw on the "storytelling" successes she has had during lunchtime, she will have an entry point to understanding the value of narrative, and her audience will learn some interesting science. Her knowledge of animal behavior and habitats adds substance to the characters and environment of her story and helps her create the mental pictures that will "make it her own." Moreover, as she composes her introduction to the folktale, we can ask her to think about how the culture that created it relates to the natural world. What might have constituted scientific evidence for them (thinking differentiation)? So, Maria's foray into storytelling exposes her to another way of knowing, reinforces her previous science learning, and

demonstrates the value of narrative structure, thus laying the groundwork for future motivation in English class. A savvy librarian who hopes to demonstrate the value of storytelling to the high-school community will share these observations with Maria's content-area teachers and her parents.

Diagnostic observation. Our second student, a high-school freshman named Taro, prides himself on being the geek who everyone turns to for computer information. He claims that he can download, install, and troubleshoot any program. He "mods," that is, he modifies hardware beyond its original functions for new uses. For example, after he unlocked his iPhone to run some third-party applications, he shared the details of his success with an online modding community committed to open source. In Taro's worldview, whether he selects a spreadsheet to analyze data or Google Gears to extend his browser's offline functionality, tools are the solution to all problems. He excels at understanding sequential information such as software manuals, computer programming languages, and directions. He reads comfortably on a computer screen, preferring bulleted, short blurbs of text that he can skim. Like Maria, Taro is less interested in longer narratives unless they build upon his prior knowledge—in this case, his fascination with computers and technology. While he never reads a book in school and is being tutored by the reading specialist, his mother reports that he devours an endless stream of science fiction late into the night. Occasionally he is open to new genres when they connect to prior knowledge; the school librarian noted that he checked out *The Martian Child* after seeing the movie.

Design and implement differentiation. Except when he is on the computer or reading books at home, everything is a distraction for Taro. If he is to read extended texts in school, he will need to practice focusing techniques and learn to modulate his reading speed to match the demands of the text. A successful encounter with storytelling depends on accommodating his learning differences and differentiating the product based on his interests. To begin, Taro's sequential thinking and preference for technology tools make him a perfect candidate to draft an online rubric for self-assessment. Subsequently the rubric can be revised in conference with the librarian, and then used by both to evaluate his process and product. By beginning with a rubric, Taro clarifies what he is going to learn from storytelling and how he will carry out the work. One differentiation tweak is to suggest that he select a "pourquoi" tale about the moon or stars (content). A

Differentiation Strategies (Content, Process, Product, Thinking)

Differentiation "Tweaks"	Differentiation Requiring More Prep
Choices of medium (books, media, games, etc.)	Tiered content, leveled resources
Student/teacher goal setting	Tiered process (leveled curriculum design, individual contracts)
Self-selected question to investigate	Tiered organizers
Open-ended activities	Tiered products
Varied journal prompts	Negotiated learning (teacher givens, student add-ins, learning contracts)
Varying scaffolds on the same organizer	Choice of process, content, medium, organizer, discussion, product
Varied pacing (SSR, video tutorials)	Curricula designed for learning styles (4-MAT, multiple intelligences, etc.)
Varied entry points	Compacting
Varied levels of questions	Community mentorships
Homework options, homework extensions	Independent studies (I-Search, Become an Expert, Museum Display and Docent)
Options for mode of expression or product (draw, explain, model)	Individual performances (Storytelling, Wax Museum Characters, Speeches)
Tweaking a mini-lesson to fit thinking style (inductive, deductive) or learning style (visual, kinesthetic, etc.)	Group investigations (problem-based, project-based)
Mini-lessons to students grouped by learning need (reteach, extend)	Teams, games, tournaments (Debates, Olympics of the Mind, Future Problem Solving)
Grouping by preferred social learning grouping (small group, pairs, solo, younger/older reading buddies)	Tiered discussion groups (Literary Club, Socratic Seminars, Harkness Table)
Discussion groups (Literary Club, Socratic seminars, Harkness Table)	Simulations, role playing (Model United Nations, Jr. Statesman, Web Quests)
Jigsaw (students specialize, then return to teach each other)	Tiered assessments (rubrics, problem-based, leveled tests)
Think-Pair-Share varied by criteria (readiness, interest, learning profile)	
Tiered assessments (self-assessment, self-generated rubric)	

more substantial modification is to allow him to produce a media-rich digital product instead of a storytelling performance. Make no mistake, this shallow skimmer will be challenged by creating a well-crafted digital story that blends multimedia technology with a meaningful plot. He will reread, pause and reflect, summarize and storyboard, and draw inferences—difficult adjustments for a habitual multitasker. Further, Taro has little experience in front of a live audience, although he likes the recognition he gets in his online modding community. As he creates a

script, pinpoints words or phrases he wants to emphasize, and practices his own narration, Taro is learning to communicate with an audience. Vocal expressiveness, pacing, and rhythm—these are baby steps toward a full-blown storytelling performance. Work on his own story will makes him curious about how others develop their tales, developing motivation for him to pay attention to their performances. Thus, storytelling is not just an appealing enrichment activity. He is extending learning behaviors and attitudes into other academic areas and practicing reading strategies, without being isolated as deficient or needing special services. The school librarian can work with the tutor to measure his progress and share the results with the administration and his parents.

Diagnostic observation. Our final student, Yukiko, is a high-school junior who writes exquisite, economical poems accompanied by ink-and-charcoal drawings that possess a haunting, magical quality. Her class notes and textbook margins are filled with detailed diagrams and sketches that, she explains, are how she remembers information. She gravitates toward books in which images and words have equal weight and pours repeatedly over them. After reading the picture book *Kogi's Mysterious Journey* (Partridge and Sogabe 2003) aloud to her younger brother, she tells the school librarian that, like the artist Kogi, she can only draw something when she feels its spirit. Although Yukiko has limited English proficiency and her reading is halting, her body's gestures express the poetic spirit that her oral language conceals.

Design and implement differentiation. To advance her comprehension of English, Yikiko's storytelling work needs to capitalize on her preferred modes of learning, which are visual, kinesthetic, and also include a linguistic appreciation of metaphor and imagery. Rather than urge this ESL student to select a controlled-vocabulary folktale, the school librarian can look for ways to scaffold her reading of a beautifully illustrated, complex folktale

(content differentiation), selectively modeling reading strategies (thinking differentiation). Unlike Maria or Taro, Yukiko is metacognitive about what she doesn't understand, amplified, no doubt, by her reflective nature and love of language. Therefore, with some explicit knowledge of reading strategies, the process of rereading, crafting a story and oral retelling will serve to build her comprehension, vocabulary, and experience with narrative structure. This visual learner will internalize the story as a series of mental pictures, a method that storytellers use to transform a story from a written narrative to an oral performance (See Sturm's "The Process of Sharing Stories with Young People," page 12). Repeated practice will build her confidence and refine her gestures and facial expressions. Her polished, expressive performance can show her parents, teachers, and the administration that storytelling is an important tool for English-language learning.

While each of these three students can be described as a skilled reader, their skills are not uniformly distributed. When they are successful, their content knowledge and learning strengths complement the demands of the text and their purpose for reading. Conversely, when they lack background knowledge of content or genre, or use reading strategies that are at odds with the task they must perform, they struggle and even fail. Lest you think that this column has been a series of vivid anecdotes about a few successful exceptions, Haven's review of the research (2007, 89–122) enumerates many positive effects of storytelling: improved comprehension and logical thinking, exposure to cross-curriculum learning, skill in analyzing narrative for meaning, motivation to learn and pay attention, creation of a sense of community and involvement, increased literacy and language mastery, stronger writing and better memory—quite a list! When the school librarian champions differentiated storytelling, the high-school community will come to see it it as a powerful tool for learning and literacy.

Indispensible Resources for Differentiated Storytelling

Bruner, Jerome. 1990. *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. Quoted in Kendall 2007, 35.

Haven, Kendall. 2007. *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story*. Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited.

Hardcastle, Valerie Gray. 2003. "The Development of Self." In Gary D. Fireman et al., eds., *Narrative and Consciousness: Literature, Psychology and the Brain*, 37-52. New York: Oxford Univ. Pr. Quoted in Kendall 2007, 35.

Nunley, Kathie F. 2006. *Differentiating the High School Classroom: Solution Strategies for 18 Common Obstacles.* Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin Press.

Partridge, Elizabeth and Aki Sogabe. 2009. *Kogi's Mysterious Journey*. New York: Dutton.

Pinker, Steven.1997. *How the Mind Works*. New York: Dutton. Quoted in Haven 2007, 37.

Silver, Harvey F., Richard W. Strong, and Matthew J. Perini. 2007. *The Strategic Teacher: Selecting the Right Research-Based Strategy for Every Lesson*. Alexandria, Va.: ASCD.

Stories teach us about life, about ourselves and about others. Storytelling is a unique way for students to develop an understanding, respect and appreciation for other cultures, and can promote a positive attitude to people from different lands, races and religions. Storytelling and intercultural understanding. There are a number of ways in which storytelling can enhance intercultural understanding and communication.