To-With-By: A three-tiered model for differentiated instruction

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All teachers differentiate instruction; it's natural, it's intuitive; we couldn't survive without differentiating. However, we can become more conscious and intentional in the ways we think about our students and in the ways we plan our lessons so that differentiation helps even more students succeed, particularly those struggling with literacy. To do that, an equally intuitive framework for differentiation is in order; one that does not require extensive training or preparation but still creates a classroom infrastructure within which differentiation occurs.

Whether we approach DI from the point of view of differences in readiness, differences in ability, differences in interest, or differences in learning profile, it involves multiple or differentiated resources, a variety of instructional strategies, and a range of options for demonstrations of understanding. Carol Tomlinson (1999) discusses differentiated content, process, and product. This could be interpreted as differentiated curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In other words, we can differentiate the resources we use, the ways we ask students to interact with the content, and the ways we ask students to demonstrate their learning.

I have been a classroom teacher for over 30 years, at every level from grades one through twelve, and in multiple disciplines. If there is one thing I have learned, it is that I have to make that conscious and intentional effort to differentiate on a daily basis. Whether we are talking about using multiple resources, different instructional strategies, or more performance-based assessments, I try always to be conscious of the unique group of students with whom I am working. And I intentionally plan my lessons to not only target state and district standards but also the readiness, abilities, interests, and learning profiles of the students in that classroom (Campbell, 2009).

The basic formula I have used for many years is To-With-By: I teach something to my students, this is usually in the form of direct instruction; then I work with my students, this is essentially guided instruction; then I push them to work more independently or by themselves, this is self-directed learning. Such an approach is sometimes referred to as Teach-Practice-Apply or I do-We do-You do. Regardless of the moniker, the beauty of this approach to teaching is that the teacher can use differentiated strategies at all three stages. Moreover, it is scaffolded for all students to ensure a "gradual release of responsibility" (Bruner, 1983). In other words, the process itself is differentiated in that it works through three tiers or levels that challenge students at progressively higher levels, plus the learning strategies within each tier are also differentiated. (See Figure 1)

There are many strategies under the umbrella of differentiated instruction: tiered lessons, flexible
grouping, anchor activities, learning centers, multimodal instruction, cooperative learning, project-based learning, and so forth. Using the To-With-By model, I can incorporate all of these strategies into my lessons. For example, multi-modal instruction can be used effectively in the to stage where I introduce a topic; cooperative learning works well in the with stage where students are practicing; and project-based learning is a natural fit for the by stage where students are applying the skills and knowledge they have learned. In the next three sections, I'll describe each of the three stages in more detail and then explain how the process can be used specifically in the context of literacy.

**Direct instruction: To**
Stage one, or tier one, is to. I call this my Main Lesson. I start out each day or each period with a lecture in which I teach something "to" my students. It might be anything from long vowels to the binomial theorem, photosynthesis to the Boston Tea Party. It usually takes 10 to 20 minutes and provides an overview or introduction to the basic skills or concepts with which we will be working.

In the Main Lesson, I am not only introducing basic skills or concepts, I am also intentionally modeling the kinds of teaching that I expect my students to do with each other when they reach stage three: self-directed learning. It is essentially lecture-based, direct instruction but I use visuals (such as graphic organizers or charts), hands-on activities (such as physical models or manipulatives), mnemonic devices (such as chants or jingles), interactive learning (such as "turn and talk" or questioning strategies), or reflective learning (such as journaling or self-assessment).

During the Main Lesson, I often "think out loud" for my students. "We are talking about Thomas Jefferson and John Adams and we're going to look at some of their similarities and some of their differences. To do that, I'm drawing this visual organizer called a Venn Diagram which we can use to compare and contrast the two men. I'm going to put Jefferson's name on this side and Adam's name on this side..." I will go on to explain that they will be expected to make the same kind of visual organizer in small groups at their learning centers to compare and contrast other characters. After that, they will also be expected to use the same type of graphics in their independent project work. It's to-with-by.

**Guided instruction: With**
Stage two, or tier two, is the with stage. This is guided instruction. Here I like to work with small groups so I set up my classroom with learning centers or what I call "work stations." Regardless of grade level or subject matter, this stage involves multiple approaches to the same concepts or skills introduced in the Main Lesson, but now students are working in small groups. Many students learn best in small groups.

Nonetheless, the same concepts or skills can be practiced in multiple ways with whole group instruction. In my classroom, students break up into small, collaborative groups and practice what was introduced in the Main Lesson in different (differentiated) ways: hands-on, visual, interactive, narrative, reflective, inductive, rhythmic, etc. This will vary depending on the management system or dynamics of individual teachers. In fact, I find that I have to modify my approach each year with different students.

As in any good collaborative lesson, small group work has three essential components: specific social skills, group interdependence, and individual accountability (Johnson and Johnson, 1994). So students are learning to work together in intentional ways, they are collaborating to meet a common goal, and they are responsible for their own learning. Sometimes each group is working on the same task or taking the same approach. At other times, each group is taking a different approach to the same skills or content. The groups rotate through the stations until each one has approached the learning task from multiple perspectives.

For some lessons, at some grade levels, and in some subject areas, it makes sense to reverse tiers one and two: a more inquiry-based approach where students might "mess around" with a topic first (with) and then come together for a collective debriefing to draw conclusions and clarify the skills or knowledge they have just experienced (to). This is particularly true in science classes but can also be the best way to process a passage students have read, a problem they have tried to solve, or some design or model they have attempted to create. With-To-By is a more constructivist approach as opposed to the more scaffolded nature of To-With-By and, given the circumstances, can be equally viable.

**Self-directed learning: By**
Stage three, or tier three, is the by stage. Here students work more independently. This can take the form of drill and practice, performance-based assessments, or project-based learning. Personally, I consider project-based learning to be the one of the most powerful ways to differentiate instruction. So, in a project-based "by" stage, students choose a topic within the content area of study, research that topic (and yes, even primary students and non-readers can do certain kinds of research), then put together some type of presentation or demonstration of learning for each other.

We cannot just ask students to "do a project" and expect anything meaningful to happen, so there is a need for considerable training and scaffolding first. As noted, I model different ways to express my understanding in the Main Lesson. These are my "project presentations" and where skills and concepts are introduced. The work
stations or learning centers provide ways that students can practice different techniques or approaches. This is the real skill building stage. Early in the school year, I start with what I call mini-projects—one dimensional demonstrations of learning such as a chart, a survey, an interview, or a report. These mini-projects evolve into more comprehensive, multimodal performances that are true demonstrations of understanding. This is the stage where students use their individual strengths and preferences to show others what skills and knowledge they have learned.

**To-With-By and literacy**

The primary objective of reading is to make meaning of the text (Smith, 1985). As all teachers of reading know (and all of us are teachers of reading), that does not happen automatically. The To-With-By approach provides the necessary scaffolding for both young children learning to read and older students working with more difficult text so they can all be successful learners who understand what they read (Harvey and Goudvis, 2000). Whether it is basic phonics work, book talks, shared reading (Holdaway, 1979), a read aloud, a reading workshop (Calkins 2001), guided reading (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996), responding to literature (Routman 1991), literature circles (Hill et al., 1995), personal journal writing (Routman, 1991), or nonfiction reading (Harvey, 1998), To-With-By makes perfect sense.

Let’s say I’m introducing some new vocabulary words using a big book or chart. For the To stage, I model fluent reading by reading through the text aloud and pointing to the words. Perhaps I stop from time to time to think out loud: “Wait, that’s a new word, that’s a big word, w-h-a-l-e, I wonder what that word is, I think I’m going to like that word...” During the With stage, students might be collaboratively working with some word cards at a learning center; arranging the cards; building sentences. The By stage could involve students independently writing or building sentences using the new words and then reading to the teacher or the class or drawing pictures, e.g., a whale, and labeling them. At each stage, I’ve used differentiated strategies.

Or, suppose, I’m working with older students on nonfiction text about the underground railroad. For the To stage, I’m going to do a brief lecture on the purpose and function of the underground railroad. I’ll show students the text and describe the context and content. I’ll probably use a map and other graphics to show routes and obstacles. I’ll probably suggest a couple of guiding questions: “What would it feel like to be actually following the underground railroad? What would be the greatest challenges?” During the With stage, I may begin with a narrative pantomime, where I read the text and students collectively act it out as I read. Then they might meet in small groups and go through the text discussing what they were doing at each stage. Finally, during the By stage, students will read the text independently, then perhaps answer some questions, make some inferences, or reflect on the text itself.

There is no limit to the breadth and depth of To-With-By in the literacy classroom. At any grade level, in any subject area, students’ literacy skills can be developed and enhanced by this scaffolded (Vygotsky, 1978) model. Teachers can bring a range of good strategies to the table for large group, small group, and independent learning. And, not only will literacy skills and knowledge improve but students will also be pleasantly engaged in a range of differentiated learning experiences.

**Conclusion**

The To-With-By model provides a range of learning opportunities for all students. All three stages can be differentiated and all three stages can be personalized for the unique learning needs of students in any classroom. As noted, the curriculum resources can be differentiated, the instructional strategies can be differentiated, and assessments can be differentiated. It is a simple formula that can be applied by any teacher, in any subject area, at any grade level.

The formula is structured, teacher directed, and content based, but it is student centered and provides students with multiple entry points into the content areas and personal choices based on their individual strengths or learning profiles (Tomlinson, 1999; Marzano, 2007). As the year goes on, or as students become more responsive to the system, they become increasingly self-directed and increasingly confident about their learning, so the balance may shift from less to or with into more with and by.

No single method works best for all teachers or for all students, but To-With-By is generic enough to be adaptable for any classroom setting. More importantly, it provides a simple framework for planning that even the least experienced of teachers can use to provide opportunities for all students to succeed. It’s not more work to differentiate; it simply means thinking about our students differently and planning our lessons in more conscious and intentional ways. To-With-By provides a framework for doing just that.

**References**


