

# November 2014 Featured Professional Development Fellow Sarah Rissler

**Hello and welcome to KCELT's third installment of our monthly podcast series featuring our Professional Development Fellows or PDFs. I am your host Jeremy Slogoski and with me today is Sarah Rissler, who teaches ELA, which stands for English language acquisition. Welcome, Sarah.**

Thank you for having me.

**Not many people know this, but Sarah and I have something in common. We are, or were in my case, both PhD students at the University of Iowa College of Education in the Foreign Language & ESL Education department. What Sarah is interested in her research field can also be applied to teaching and learning generally here at Kirkwood Community College. It's called differentiated instruction. But before we talk differentiated instruction, can you tell us a little bit about yourself? Specifically, can you tell us about your journey of becoming a Kirkwood faculty member through becoming a Professional Development Fellow?**

Sure thing. I started at Kirkwood in 2010. My husband was completing his coursework here and I was just returning from living in Spain for a year where I was completing a Masters degree in Spanish. The stars aligned and a position opened up in Iowa City for a Spanish instructor. When I got the job I spent my first year getting to know the college and then in my second year I became vice co-chair of the Adjunct Faculty Advisory Committee. Through my work on that committee I began meeting people in KCELT so when a Professional Development Fellow position became available, I was encouraged by a number of my colleagues to apply. And the rest, as they say, is history. I am currently in my third year as a PDF.

**Now about differentiated instruction, can you tell us a little bit about it and how it applies not only to ELA students but how also to all students here at Kirkwood?**

Differentiated instruction is a philosophy of teaching that takes into account students' interests and levels of learning. When I work with language students in either Spanish or ELA, as I am now, it is important that I find ways to connect the course objectives to student background knowledge and experiences so as to make the learning come alive for them. This can be done for all students at all levels of learning. Most research on differentiation is at the K-12 level and much more needs to be done in higher education which is one of the tasks I have undertaken in my role as a PDF. Currently, I find that asking students via a survey at the beginning of a course about interests, reasons for taking the course they are in, and their goals for the end of the course help me to tailor activities to students' interests and language levels. When students feel like their teacher cares about them, they are generally more inclined to participate in their learning and also to take responsibility for their learning. When this happens, the learning experience is more robust than a traditional one-size fits all approach.

**What has impressed you about our Kirkwood faculty, including our new full-time faculty and the faculty within your department?**

A large percentage of the faculty at Kirkwood have been kind and willing to try new modes of instruction in my experience. New faculty have demonstrated a commitment to improving teaching practices with a focus on student learning. In the English Department, I

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have been welcomed as I have transitioned from teaching Spanish to English Language Learners. We collaborate with one another and share ideas which is very useful when learning a new curriculum. I am in a somewhat unique position because I am not a full-time faculty member. I am an adjunct instructor which means that I teach part-time. In organizing my time to teach part-time, I am able to complete my PhD program coursework and undertake the research that I am interested in. I am fortunate that Kirkwood allows opportunities such as this and supports instructors as we strive for our educational and research goals.

### **What excites you about teaching our Kirkwood students?**

Kirkwood students want to learn even if they are not always necessarily over the moon about every content area. By and large, our students are here because they want to be here either to gain employment in the workforce or to transfer to another college. Students at community colleges are diverse group which makes use of differentiation even more important. If a student wants to learn, that student ought to be given the opportunity. Here at Kirkwood, we give students those opportunities. We know that when the economy is doing well, or better, that enrollment drops because students have found jobs and that is great. We also know that when the economy is in a recession students go to community colleges to get training in technical fields or complete liberal arts coursework so as to transfer to a four-year degree granting program. At Kirkwood we help students reach their goals, we give students opportunities, and I believe our students know this.

### **What advice would you give to our faculty who may be considering to become a Professional Development Fellow?**

If you are interested in professional growth, then becoming a Professional Development Fellow is a great opportunity for you to explore the ways in which you can grow professionally as well as support your colleagues in their professional growth.

**Thank you, Sarah, for sharing your passion for teaching and learning with us.**