

May 2015 Featured Professional Development Fellow Shelby Myers-Verhage

Hello and welcome to KCELT's ninth installment of our monthly podcast series featuring our Professional Development Fellows or PDFs. I am your host Jeremy Slagoski and with me today is Shelby Myers-Verhage, associate professor of English at our Iowa City campus. Welcome, Shelby.

Thank you

Can you tell us what brought you to Kirkwood Community College and what interested you in becoming a Professional Development Fellow?

I came out of a long teaching background. I taught in public schools for a long time, and then I taught at the University of Iowa in English Education. And the first thing that drew me to being a teaching fellow was when I was at the University of Iowa, I was teaching pre-service teachers. And I really found value in helping people get started in the profession and nurturing teachers. So being a Professional Development Fellow gave me another opportunity to help teachers here on our campus. And the second thing was, because I teach at the Iowa City campus, my goal was to bring more KCELT activities and connections to the Iowa City campus. A lot of times down here in Iowa City, we kind of feel like our own little island, which is good but is also isolating. So I wanted to help us to make more of a link between the main campus and the Iowa City campus.

One of Shelby's interests is integrating ELA students into the classroom. Can you tell us a little bit of why you believe it is important to integrate English language learners into the classroom and how subject matter teachers can help them?

I teach English and reading strategies courses, so it's a natural progression for literacy learners of all kinds and all levels to come to my courses. And I teach a lot of developmental adult students, so students who are coming back to school for the first time, or students that need just a little bit more boost in their literacy skills. And so working with ELA learners is a natural piece of the teaching that I do. The other thing is our population is growing in our ELA community. On the Iowa City campus, it's just bursting—and on main campus too. And I always had the philosophy as a teacher that you teach the learners that you have, so I had to learn how to adapt my own teaching strategies for ELA learners. And I have grown as a teacher because of that. It's been a very enriching experience both ways to sort of understand the literacy levels that they're at and also the connections that they can make and also the ways we can boost their skills.

So do you have any tips for subject matter teachers to help ELA students?

The biggest struggle that they deal with is vocabulary, so any ways to do vocabulary [learning] strategies to understand the terms and the context of the language that is used in that genre, like the language of biology or the language of political science; anything that allows them more tools to understand not only what the words mean but the concepts behind them and pronunciation too. I use a lot of online tools to teach them reference tools for ways to search for meanings and understandings, but then also to translate that into their own language and their own meaning.

The second thing is that a lot of ELA learners need assistance understanding textbooks in English, so the more that they could provide outlining or reading strategies, especially at the

May 2015 Featured Professional Development Fellow Shelby Myers-Verhage

beginning of the semester or at the introductory chapters, just to teach them how to get into the language of the course. Those are some great strategies to get them off on a good foot. But many ELA learners are so earnest and so dedicated to trying hard. Those little supports can really make a difference in vocabulary and reading strategies.

Now let's talk about your colleagues. What has impressed you about working alongside our new and experienced Kirkwood faculty?

There so much expertise that they bring that they often don't know that they have. I appreciate the many, many diverse areas of teachers that we have in the way that these teachers have come from experience in the field or experience from different campuses or working with different learners. I really appreciate those things that they have. Secondly, we have a very strong collaborative spirit, especially in the Master Teacher Program. They come in as a group. They know each other as a group. It's one of the few places on campus where it's completely diversified departments. A lot of times, when I started in English, I worked all the time with my English cohort, which is great, but it's really helpful to step outside of your own department area, and to see what's going on around the campus. I think it's a great way to learn about the campus too and what else we do at Kirkwood.

What excites you about teaching our Kirkwood students?

There is so much diversity that they bring in their stories, in their life experiences. As an English teacher, I get the fabulous opportunity to read a lot of their personal narratives and personal arguments on issues that are important to them, so I get a glimpse into their lives and their minds in a way that I think other teachers don't get. I never tire of reading or hearing what those stories are. Everything is so different.

My very first teaching job was as an 8th grade teacher, and so very often a lot of 8th graders didn't have a lot of life experience, but our adult students and our ELA learners come from such diverse backgrounds that they are so amazing to me, and the things that they've overcome and the journeys they've taken to get here.

What advice would you give to our faculty who may be considering a Professional Development Fellowship?

I would say two things. Find something that you can share, that you have some way to share with other faculty about. And it's not to say that you're an expert but just that you have an idea, or something that you want to give to some new teachers.

And the second thing is find a way that you want to grow in the way that what's going to enrich you. What's a way you want to learn? What's a way that you can push and challenge yourself in what you're doing? And I think that's very enriching for me to learn from these other individuals teaching in other areas around campus. It gives me a boost in my own teaching and understanding. And it also, as I said, helps us learn more about Kirkwood and what we do as a whole campus system. It helps you not feel so isolated. It helps me tell my Iowa City students about the program areas that are available to them or other career opportunities that they offer. And a lot of times they don't even realize or think about those things. And it allows me to make connections across campus.

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

May 2015 Featured Professional Development Fellow Shelby Myers-Verhage

That was Shelby Myers-Verhage, associate professor of English at Kirkwood Community College's Iowa City campus.

This has been a KCELT production of the Professional Development Fellows Interview series. Shelby Myers-Verhage was interviewed on Monday, May 18th, 2015. For more information about KCELT and the Professional Development Fellows, please visit our website at kcelt.org or follow us on Twitter, Facebook, and Google+. If you are a faculty member, please feel free to stop by our offices in Cedar Hall. We'd love to see you and talk about teaching and learning. KCELT: Engage...Discover...Connect.