

Shannon Simonelli:

Aloha and welcome to Effective Practice Briefings, a series of audio conversations focusing on evidenced based practice in education.

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Our session today focuses on Differentiating Instruction. Our speakers today are Carol Tomlinson, a national expert on Differentiating Instruction. She's taught for twenty-one years at the high school, middle school, elementary and pre-school levels. She's broadly published in Differentiating Instruction and also works at the university level.

We're very pleased to have Carol with us today. We've also got Dr. Julie Smith who is with the State Improvement Grant and is our curriculum development expert and working to implement some of the strategies at the school level, and I'm Dr. Shannon Simonelli with the Center on Disability Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, serving as your host and moderator – so lets begin.

JULIE:

Thank-you and good morning. This is Julie and I'm going to start this off by asking Carol to talk a little bit about her journey into finding Differentiated Instruction an effective framework for teaching such a wide range of learners.

CAROL:

Well, I have to say that my first vow as a young person was that I would never be a teacher. As my mother was in the same school I was in when I was a young adolescent and that was just more than I could bear. So I was ready to take on any occupation in the world except teaching. My mom was a woman of the old school and she felt that a young woman should be prepared to teach whether they were going to or not, because it was useful. So since she was paying college tuition bills, I took some education courses and grumbled the whole time because I was never going to use them. And she was nice enough never to tell you I told you so. My second vow was that I would never teach middle school, which I wasn't going to, and that was because when I was a seventh grader, I was such a miserable human being and, the notion of watching that misery and definitely just seemed really hopeless and of course as luck had it, I spent most of my public school career teaching middle school.

When I began teaching however I was teaching in a high school in a very rural area that was pretty isolated in North Carolina. And, I had a good range of students, particularly a lot of students who really were having difficulty learning. And, I would

have to say that for me, teaching was great fit from the beginning. I really, really enjoyed being with the kids. But I was a pretty clueless teacher and the first year that I taught I think was really more about survival than anything else. Even though I had a wide range of students in my classes, I think I was pretty much just clueless about the fact that I might do anything about that. And so when I put stuff in the grade books which is what I thought a good teacher did, I felt good when somebody made an "A" because that must have meant I was doing something right. And I felt sort of sad when it wasn't working for a student but it didn't occur to me to do anything about it.

After my beginning of teaching in high school I regressed very nicely and developed a pre-school, opened a pre-school. And in that place, we started our first year with three students and ended the year with our maximum allowed by a license which was fifty-five. And in those fifty-five students, if I recall correctly, we had twenty some odd language groups represented.

JULIE:

Wow!

CAROL:

And so again there was huge diversity around me but it still didn't occur to me too much that I would need to do anything about that which now in retrospect seems really silly but that's the way it was.

When I started teaching in middle school, which is where I stayed the longest, I had worked with some teachers the summer before I actually began teaching, to develop a curriculum guide and was so pleased that I had that ready to go. Prior to that it had always felt like a scramble every day to figure out what was going to happen the next day. At that point when school began, I really felt like I was a real teacher. I made the foolish conclusion that if the kids hadn't eaten me alive before that point, they probably weren't going to. And also I felt very secure because that curriculum guide not only told me what to do the first day of school but it really showed me what I should do all the way to the end of the year. It was not a rigid guide. It was a kind of pacing guide that we give to teachers these days but it just seemed really reassuring to me.

And oh I guess it must have been about the second week of school I was standing in the hall waiting for classes to change which we were required to do, a little fellow who was a good foot and a half shorter than I was came up to me and tried whispering something and I couldn't quite hear what it was he was whispering because his hand was over his mouth. After three or four attempts and not getting it with all the noise that the kids in the hall I pulled down his hand and kind of squatted down to where he was so I could read his lips. I thought he was trying to tell me where his locker was and that he was panicked because he couldn't get his locker open. What he actually was saying to me was, "I can't read." He was a seventh grader but he was fifteen-year-old seventh grader who was coming into my class for the first time that day. He really did not know the alphabet. I think that was my

moment of epiphany. I can remember standing there in the hall thinking, I don't know how to deal, what do I do? Why did he get this far and not knowing how, which is irrelevant because he did. Do I put him next to somebody in the room and hope they can teach him? Do I try to keep him separate so the kids don't see that he is working with other materials? How do I find time to work with him if I had to stand up in front of the whole class? For heavens sake, how do I grade this kid because if I had to grade him in comparison with everybody else, I might as well just go ahead tell him right now, "it's over." I think one of the clearest things to me at the time was that sense that the curriculum guide that I thought was going to save me was really going to kill me because no matter what we did, he couldn't even get to the front of that curriculum guide before the year ended. Let alone get all the way through it.

And so for me, I think that really was sort of the baseball bat that hit you in the head and makes you realize something has to change in the way you see school. I discovered later in the year that I had students in the class who were as far advanced as this kiddo whose name was Golden was behind and realized for them that the curriculum guide was pretty futile too because whereas Golden couldn't get to the front of it by the time the year was over, these kids really pretty much had gone all the way through it before the year began. Once I had stayed with that group a little bit longer I discovered that really my population was fairly bi-modal. I had a lot of students who were in really bad shape academically, not quite as bad as Golden but bad shape. And quite a number of students who were very, very, advanced and really almost nobody in the middle.

So, for me, if I was going to survive at all, teaching to the middle was the least effective thing I could do, now I had the chance to look into other people's classes but it really was that group of seventh graders, quite a long ago that started me down that pike.

JULIE:

Yeah, and I really think it is common for many of us that we have an event like that where it really goes back to the saying that the children less everything that we need to know to teach them if we will listen to them. They're our best teachers.

CAROL:

I always have, I didn't realize at that morning but I've known for long time that it was a great act of courage that the little kid came to me and said what he said. The first sense of vulnerability that he's going to trust this really tall woman with this secret of his.

It's quite a trust really. And in the end, it's a trust of the kids that have advanced ability. They really don't have any choice but to be dependent on you. And so we can really look at that and see the signals that they send and invite them to participate in it with you. To me now it's long since been the only way to go.

JULIE:

Right, right. And Carol, differentiated instruction has gotten a lot of popularity lately and in the islands here we hear that word almost in every school that walk into and in almost every conversation with teachers. But I'm discovering as I'm sure you're aware, that there are many understandings of what that is and they aren't all the same. So I'm wondering if you could take a little time to address what differentiated instruction is and what it is not.

CAROL:

I'll be glad to. I think some of the understandings are probably misunderstandings. And what I mean by that is that they send us down the wrong path, a path that probably never will get us to where we need to go. There are really many answers that I could give you for this so let me try a few and then you redirect me if you'd like.

I think one of the misunderstandings that people have is that differentiation is something that all teachers do already. We often hear, "I already do that," or "teachers always do that." In fact, I think that teachers do something like differentiation but what we see is that it's almost always what I've come to call reactive differentiation. What that means is we bring in a single lesson plan during the day and we really have it in our heads that we'll all do the same thing. We find out that it's not working then we try really hard to stand nearer a kid who's fidgety or to run around the room and give kids a little extra help when they needed or to pull something off of a shelf to give kids that finished early, or to kind of try to figure out how to readjust our explanation. That's sort of reactive differentiation certainly has a place in a classroom but the way the term probably means to some of is to use it in a proactive sense. In other words, with the teacher first acknowledging these kids are just different from each other. They're different in quite a number of ways and I've got some information about them that I can use to help me know how to plan better. On many days then it means that we go in with multiple avenues to accomplish the goals that we want to accomplish. Those are ready up front.

So that if we had some students who need extra help, we might sit down with that group and talk with them or re-teach them in a different way. If some kids would do better working alone and some with a partner, we have the room set up so that some students can work at a more private area and some work with partners on the other side of the room. Or, we gone in with reading materials at different levels so that there's a match for everybody and we are not stuck with kids that can't read the text or kids for whom it's too easy.

Very few of us as teachers do good proactive differentiation. As our schools get more and more diverse, it really is not going to be adequate. I think it already isn't adequate just to try to improvise on the spot.

It really takes looking at ongoing assessment data and using that not fill the grade book but to inform instruction and helping to figure out before we go in the classroom how we can arrange what we do so that more kids can succeed at it.

JULIE:

Sure.

CAROL:

I think a second misconception with differentiation is that as long we give kids a choice of something, that's differentiation. Certainly under some parameters, choices is a pretty good thing. Most human being prefer to have a choice then not to have a choice. But just giving a student a choice does not necessarily address their readiness needs. It doesn't necessarily help advanced students move ahead. It certainly doesn't make up for academic deficits for kids who are behind. Sometimes, choice, if it is not structured appropriately can even let kids make choices that would move them from absolutely essential goals in the classroom. While teacher structured choice is a small portion of differentiation and not insignificant it needs to be choice that is focused on absolutely essential learning goals and it also be coupled with attending the kids readiness level and their interests and how they learn.

The third thing that I see that is kind of a misapplication is that differentiation really is about the instructional strategies you use in the classroom. In other words, as long as I use learning contracts or as long as I use tiered lessons or as long as I use a learning center, I must be differentiating.

Kind of again a paradox there. Instructional strategies can be really powerful. James Strong tells us that instructional strategies can be just about as powerful in student achievement as student's abilities are. That does have a great deal of talent. But differentiation really is not about the instructional strategies. There's no certain strategy that you have to use. It's really about trying to make sure that every student has the support they need to move as far and as fast as they can with whatever really matters in the curriculum. Just because you use an instructional strategy doesn't necessarily mean you do that. In other words, I've seen lots of learning contracts that teachers use where kids are getting inequivalent learning because the versions of the contract aren't the same.

Or, I've seen activities that teachers had set up that are really interesting and clever but it's a little doubtful about what it is that's happening as a result of that.

JULIE:

Right.

CAROL:

I think it's really important to know that at least for me, that differentiation is much more of a philosophy and a way thinking about teaching than it is about any strategy.

Another misconception or area where we need a little bit of tightening is that you just sort of decide on a Tuesday to go in and differentiate instruction. Usually that comes from the fact that it's not linked closely to on going assessment. Differentiation is really logical. The game plan sort of is, do you know precisely what kids should

know, understand and be able to do as a result of the unit? And then, do you know precisely what they should be able to know, understand and do as a result of today's lesson? Then, using on-going assessment, do you know where each student is in relation to those goals? Once you know that, then which students need some additional scaffolding which needs some extension, which ones might need to learn in a different way. That really is the game plan over and over and over. But, frequently teachers differentiate, I think or something like that just because someone has said to and it really is not linked to assessment data. And so it becomes more about the teacher jumping through hoops than it does really responding to a kid's learning needs.

I think that's another one that it's really good for us to think about and realize that we are not talking with differentiation about anything that is strange and different. We're talking about clear instructional goals, which is, curriculum and a plan to get kids there. Assessment that first informs instruction and let us know where kids are and ultimately let us know if they got to the final destination and then teaching that helps kids get where they need to go. And so it's not really any different than what we always talk about which is the link between curriculum, instruction and assessment except where the notion in this case the assumption is that the kind of kids differ will need different things to get them to the goal and that assessment will inform us on that.

JULIE:

Carol, in one of your writings, you talked about differentiated instruction being student centered. Could you speak to how the eye is student centered?

CAROL:

I think that's a very core concept and it's related to what I was just talking about, it is really about the kids and not about the teacher.

The assumption is every student in that class comes to us with particular strengths and particular deficits. They come with particular dreams. They function better with certain relationships with people. And they learn at different speeds. They learn in different ways. And our goal as teachers really is to help them get as much as they possibly can out of school. And we sort of put the stuff on the table in front of them with a kind of a "take it or leave it" teaching. Many of them don't have too much choice but to leave it because the stuff out their ballpark. It is either way too hard or way too easy for them or they totally lose interest.

JULIE:

Totally irrelevant.

CAROL:

And so what we are trying to do in differentiation is to keep the curriculum goals in mind but keep looking at the student. Who is turned on by this? Who is really excited about it? Who have I lost? In what ways does that student learn best? And the truth

of the matter is, the teacher's job really is to figure that out and then figure out the mechanisms for hooking the kid on to the curriculum that really matters the most. In that case, it has to be student centered. I had a student of mine who was observing last year in a classroom where a teacher had the reputation of differentiating well and she came back after she had been there for a day and she said to me, "you know I watched her and she differentiated from early in the morning until school ended..." And then she paused for a minute and she said, "but you I don't think she knew the students." I kept waiting for her to finish the sentence. She never did finish it. She was through. But the piece that was puzzling her was that it was not a response to students. It was just a performance the teacher was giving. And so that she spent that she was doing something because these poor students needed. It was more or less she was doing it because somebody had shown her how to do it.

JULIE:

We really see a lot of that.

CAROL:

And so at the end of the day, it was sort of like if a whole different group of students had been in there she'd have done exactly the same thing. In that case, that's teacher-centered differentiation, not a response to students.

JULIE:

Exactly, and I think that kind of takes us back to one of your earlier comments about the importance of building community in your classroom because you cannot do, you cannot have a differentiated approach to instruction if you don't know your students well.

SHANNON:

I'm going to ask that to be a point where we take a break, let our listeners sort of digest for a second and we'll be right back in just a moment.

SHANNON:

So welcome back to our discussion with Carol Tomlinson and Dr. Julie Smith. I'm Dr. Shannon Simonelli and we are in our second session about differentiated instruction.

JULIE:

Carol, we were just talking about knowing our students very well and that sense of community so that we can use it, differentiated instruction approach to learning in the classroom that is very much student centered, how would you suggest that teachers get started with that and then what are some of the barriers that you encounter and how you navigate those?

CAROL:

I think it's critical to get to know students and part of that really is a mind-set. I think teaching is a very busy profession and there's so many things buzzing around us all the time, so many things teachers are responsible for and I suspect many folks can

equate what that feels like with what it's like at home even. If you have children there, you have to get dinner on the table and somebody's clothes have to be washed. Something needs to be straightened up someplace. Somebody has to be driven somewhere and at the end of the week it finally occurs to you that you haven't said anything to each other. You've just run in circles. Most parents work very hard to find time with their kids so that even if the house is a little bit messy, they sit down and talk together or they spend some time together in the evening. The reason for that is, you really don't want your students, your kids, children to grow up and you'd have the feeling you never known each other. What that almost inevitably takes is making time for that. The same thing is true in school. I think it starts with the mind-set even though you accept the fact that you have too many things to do. If you had forty-eight hours in a day you couldn't get them done. It's a matter of reminding yourself what matters most. It is the human beings that matter most. There are a lot of little things you can do. I don't think there is any one again because I think different approaches will work better for different teacher's personality.

For example, I was talking with a very new teacher in Washington D.C. last year and he said to, "you know I'm very new at this and there is so many things I don't know. Every day I find out more that I don't know." He said, "every day when the kids get ready to come in the room, I stop what I'm doing and I stand at the door. I speak to every one of them. In my head I say to myself over and over, I want to be the teacher today for this child that I want my child to have."

I thought to myself, you may have a lot to learn but you're going to be OK. Because, what he's really doing is accepting those kids that come in the door as his own. He is trying to value them as much as he wants somebody to value his son. Even making it a religion that you stand at the door when the kids come in and make comments to each of them everyday, multiplied by a hundred and eighty days makes a big difference.

JULIE:

That's right!

CAROL:

You can use notes that you've make as you walk around class and jot down students having trouble with paragraphing and write five names under that issue. You see five kids are having difficulty with it. I've seen teachers that get large index cards and put a students name on each one and then just make it a habit to walk around with some of those on a clip board and respond to things that they see from those students, what the kid's excited about, what are they talking about in class. I think personally, not everybody would agree with me on this but I think it's important when class starts or stops every day to have a very brief, just human conversation with the kids, something about what you've done or asking them something about what they've done or referring to something neat that happened in town over the weekend. I think it's important to give kids little questionnaires at the beginning of the year. Tell me what you do with your free time. Tell me a book that you've read recently or movie that you've seen that you liked. Tell me how you feel about

yourself as a math student. Why do you feel that way? Just things where you try to gather information. I think it's really helpful to ask kids at the end of the week or end of two weeks to take a slip of paper and tell you what's worked best for them in class and what they wish they could be changed.

There are just really lots of ways to get to know kids better. I had personal communication journals with my students. They weren't learning logs. They were just little sort of legalized note passing so if they wanted to tell me something they could put those journals in a little box on my desk. And sometimes they tell me really exciting things like what music they were listening to and what piece are they reading. But other times they told me things that I really needed to know about them and about their lives. I really think it starts with the mind-set of saying I've got to know the kid better. Doing things that are both formal like surveys and informal like standing at the door to try to be able to do that.

JULIE:

Sure, and I think, Carol, what I'm observing is teachers are willing to go down this path of differentiated instruction and what ever conception they have of that. What I'm seeing is as they are teaching to the standards and trying to get their test scores up because the stakes are so high they are not seeing how they can incorporate this approach into that framework and make things even better for kids.

CAROL:

That's a very complicated issue and let me try to attack it from two or three perspectives. I really, really, do understand the pressure that teacher have now. It's the greatest pressure that I've seen in the very long time I've been in education now and there's no way really to minimize the pressure that they feel.

On the other hand, if we allow ourselves to become test preparation experts instead of teachers we'd change the profession really remarkably and I think not in a good direction. But I think we only have two choices there, that is to think about what we're doing and fight against that or just succumb to it. One of the things that is really critically important is that we don't have any evidence that just because you cover something with kids, they even do any, that are on a test, in other words if you are covering something with kids that they don't meaning of, especially kids who are struggling, they can't even retain it for the test. There's absolutely no way, one of the paradoxes is that kids who have the most difficulty learning are the ones who have the most difficulty memorizing pointless information.

JULIE:

Exactly.

CAROL:

With the coverage of stuff, without any sense that the kid have to learn it, my job is to cover it. If all that matters to us is the test scores we can't even do that. What makes it work better, and this is hard, I'm not remotely suggesting it's easy. I just

suggesting it's teaching. Just be able to say, OK, I've been given some information that I have to cover with kids that's really not my curriculum. That's stuff to use in my curriculum. The analogy I use sometimes with my students is you don't take your guest into your kitchen and line up raw hamburger meat and beans in a can and onions still in their husk and spices in a jar and other things like that and say just chop on them guys, that's chili, it's dinner. Those are ingredients for dinner. They aren't dinner. You use the ingredients and arrange them appropriately so that they are tasty and palatable and so that people want to come back and eat again. One of the really hard things for us right now is we're still trying to just feed kids the ingredients. We are in such a panic that we are not trying to figure out how to make dinner of it.

If you take the ingredients that you've been given and organize them in such a way that they make sense and have clarity yourself about what's really the essential understanding and what's critical knowledge and skills and if you can help kids use the information and the skills to understand the essential understandings the paradox of it is that they remember the stuff better than if you just covered the stuff. The reason is because it makes some sense and it can connect with their lives. I don't know that I think we can do much of anything, teaching, knowing kids and paradoxically improving test scores if all we're trying to do is race through an acreage of curriculum. A kind of extreme example of that happened in a conversation with me a couple years ago as I was talking with a woman in Texas and she said to me, "You don't understand. I have to cover everything from prehistoric times to modern Texas history one semester." You could just see she was almost hyperventilating. I said, you know when you do that, you must sometimes have the sense that you're covering it but kids aren't going with you. She looked at me and she said almost like I was asking where my shoe laces were, "Well, of course I know most of them can't make it with me but at least at the end of the year I've covered it." I don't even think she was able at that point with the panic to understand how that sounds and she was a very earnest person. She was a good human being. She wasn't a person trying to do anything wrong. But sometimes we get so caught up in the, in what seems to be only hope we have that we don't even take time to look at it and see that the hope is not a hope very much. Although by definition

JULIE:

And they take good care their students and they think they're doing the right thing by making sure that those scores come up and teaching like you said, giving the ingredients but not making the dinner.

CAROL:

That's right. And you know again, one of the things that you said earlier is so important. There are a few kids in our classes who no matter what we ask them to do will do it. They are so determined to do well and to get good grades that they just are almost Teflon when it comes to our errors.

JULIE:

They're teacher-proof already.

CAROL:

But the vast majority of kids really come to us with some hunger to be known and to be affirmed for who they are.

They need to feel safety in a classroom. They need to feel affiliation with other people. Even as you look at Maslow's Hierarchy, achievement comes way up after a number of other things. There are not many kids who are going to endure year after year after year of only feeling like a test score.

JULIE:

Exactly

CAROL:

And for many of them, especially kids who don't see their way to a future that incorporates learning and more school. It just gets more and more and more irrelevant. The truth of the matter is, we don't tend to get higher test scores from kids who feel no affiliation with what we are asking them to do. Even when we do, we don't get kids who are prepared for a life.

JULIE:

Correct.

CAROL:

I think that's a place to stop and breathe deeply three times too. In the end when we stop and take a look back over our shoulder at our professions, I suspect most went into teaching so we could say you know my job is help kids build lives, not my job, my career, was to prepare kids to test. Those are hard things. I understand the pressure but I don't think in the end that we can make the mistake of continuing to assume that ingredients and dinner are the same thing. The art of teaching is to be able to take the ingredients and make dinner.

SHANNON:

And I just really want to flag what you said about the desire to be known. That stirred me very deeply. I think that's a very central point that I just want to thank you for commenting on.

CAROL:

I really do that's just absolutely critical. I don't think that there's many students who come to us saying, "Oh I'm so excited that I'm getting ready to learn multiplication this year." Or, "I'm just so thrilled that I'm going to get read seven novels." I think they come to us saying can you show me I'm OK as I am and can you help me become something better.

JULIE:

Take me by my hand and lead me forward.

CAROL:

Yes, absolutely. Show me a better life for me that I can dream for myself.

SHANNON:

That's exactly right.

JULIE:

And I think that is all important stuff and I guess my next question is we got teachers out there with all these ingredients and their not making dinner, how do you get the teachers started with the desire to make dinner?

CAROL:

You know, I think most of us when we start cooking, somebody shows us how. I think too many of us go into a kitchen without ever having cooked with a mom or a dad or watched a cooking channel on TV or something. I think sometimes as leaders we are hideously inefficient because we expect every teacher to discover dinner on their own. What we are asking when we ask teachers to make dinner from ingredients is difficult and it's scary. It actually takes some risk taking on teacher's parts. But it would be awfully cumbersome to assume everybody is going to discover the principles of good cooking without some kind of person to show them or a good cook book or something to watch on television. I fault leadership for that a lot. We need folks who say leadership for teachers is helping them to learn to make dinner. It's not that we can't learn it on our own as teachers, it's just asking an awful lot to expect all teachers to learn it on their own. In the end whether somebody show us or whether we have to figure it out on our own, what really need to be saying and there are a number of good curriculum models that can help us with this. Ironically, all of them say the same thing. They say it just in different words. They say the same thing because it's the basis of what we know about teaching and learning but we need to ask what seems to be and isn't really a fairly simple question and that is, when we study the American revolution, there are years worth of information about the American revolution. There are people that spend lifetimes studying the American revolution. What is it that's really essential knowledge? What's the information that kids would be culturally illiterate without knowing? What skills do they really have to have? Skills are things like basic things like basic skills of text reading and writing but also skills of judging the quality of a resource or conducting an interview, getting along with other people. The capstone in that is not what should they know and what should they be able to do but what must they understand about this. The understandings are the hard part. We can find the knowledge of skills. The only hard part there is trying to narrow it down to a manageable amount. The understandings are the glue that keep it together. An expert in any field, interestingly will go to the understandings before anything else because it is the understandings that make the stuff make sense. It's what makes it worthwhile. The part that we know how to do as teachers because we haven't had it modeled for us very well, and nobody shown us

is, where do those understandings come from? What does it mean? You have to sit down and say first, I don't think I know. Well then, maybe it's this. Maybe it's not this. Maybe it's this thing. You do kind of a brainstorming, lumbering around sort of thing. I had one colleague who used to try to develop oh, four, five, six understandings for each unit and say to the kids, let's see which understanding you can find. She actually set up a wall in her room so that she would put potential understanding on tag board in a left hand column wall and kids could add others. And they would test them through the unit and the ones that they all decided were in fact valid understandings, they'd put into the second column which was that they agreed they were important understandings.

The ones that they could never demonstrate really held water went into the third column that they rejected. What the teacher used to say was that every year she'd work hard to develop what she thought were the core understandings for the unit. Inevitably the kids would show her some that were more important than the ones that she had found. I think that's fine. I think you get better with that year after year and I think the kids can help you.

What we know really is that kids ought to be aiming at those essential understandings throughout a unit.

It was a long time before somebody taught me this but a good activity is something that you ask students to make, do or create using the essential knowledge and the essential skills in order to come to understand an essential understanding. We can learn do that on our own. After a while, it gets much easier and of course it's much more exciting because the stuff starts making sense to us too. The understandings are powerful because they make it easier for kids to remember. They make it easier for kids to transfer. They make it easier for kids to apply but the understandings also, for example understandings in history aren't just about the American revolution. They bind all history together. Frequently they bind history to other subjects. Probably more to the point is they bind history to our lives because they are universal. That's what makes learning really interesting. You realize always that you are looking in a mirror and suddenly you are able to think about yourself or having an "aha" or figuring out something you didn't understand the day before. We can't remember nearly as many pieces of stuff as teachers want us too for a test. We just can't even get that amount of stuff into long-term memory and especially kids that don't have a very good memory to start with. We can put in there a number of essential understandings and those act like Velcro. The information and the skills really stick to them.

SHANON:

And all the brain research supports that, that we learn things in clusters and bundles. Yeah. That's a great image.

CAROL:

It doesn't much matter which of the major curriculum models you look at, everybody explains it in a different way but they are explaining exactly the same thing.

JULIE:

I appreciate your example of the chart of understands and classifying and sorting those kinds of things. That's a nice example for teachers to kind of envision.

I'm wondering if you can give us some specific examples of some strategies that you can use to differentiate instruction within a packaged curriculum that's mandated by the school. You know many of them have America's Choice, for example, or Success for All, that kind of thing in there. How would you suggest they go about using some strategies to differentiate within that context.

CAROL:

Well, I have tell you that I think of scripted curriculum is very difficult on a number of levels. Again, not everybody in the world agrees with me on this and that's what makes the world go around. But in the end, I don't think we develop thoughtful teachers by handing them scripts. I don't think we develop thoughtful students either. The packaged scripts, if I had a choice to do this today and it has to last for this many minutes, I think in the end we'll find should have done away with long since and we'll probably do us more harm than good. Depending on the rigidity of the script.

JULIE:

There are differences, of course.

CAROL:

That's right.

JULIE:

I'm looking at how many schools that I am working with that have this curriculum and the teachers are men, some have more flexibility in it than others do but some opportunities for them to still be able to use a differentiated approach to everything and still maintain the integrity of the curriculum that they are mandated to use.

CAROL:

Sure, and I think when they're more toward the guide side and less toward the straight jacket side you have much more possibilities there. I think you can even with the straight jackets, if you have a little creativity and a little courage, you can do something. I think it's possible for example to ask yourself, would it be more sensible if for homework tonight, some kids did one thing and some did another. I have evidence that some students really actually need a little more time on what we did yesterday even though were supposed to move on today. Would it be possible to assign homework differently to different kids sometimes? Might it be possible to have learning centers in the room where students can practice what they need to practice instead of just a mandated thing? Is it possible to use a particular topic or writing assignment but to let kids come at it in different ways? Might it even make more sense to sometimes teach the lesson that you're supposed to teach today and I've seen teachers do this. It's an illustration actually in a math class when the

teacher actually taught the math lesson twice during the day. Once in the morning to one group of kids and another time in the afternoon to another group because the groups were in very different places and she needed to be able to use different kinds of manipulatives or to explain things more than one way to some students and to be able to make the work of some of the others a little bit more advanced than the book was allowing them to do.

I think it's just a question of looking at what the particular target is. I think the thing that you're most accountable for with those is to target, not necessarily always that everybody took exactly the same number of steps.

SHANNON:

Let's take a break here and we'll be back in just a moment.

I'd like to welcome everybody back to the third section of our discussion with Carol Tomlinson on differentiating instruction. Go ahead Julie.

JULIE:

OK Carol, as we were talking about students and their strengths and needs and individual idiosyncrasies and so on, it kind of leads me to students with disabilities being part of a natural landscape of classroom diversity. I would like for you to talk a little bit about some strategies within differentiated instruction that really seem to benefit some of the kids with disabilities that are receiving spent services.

CAROL:

Well, again, that's such a wide spectrum of students. Their disabilities are so many different kinds and so many different degrees of difficulty. Sometimes just a little bit of flexibility helps. Some students for example who have emotional difficulties or attention deficit problems do just fine in a classroom where there's an opportunity to move around a little bit or where the teacher's keen enough to be able to realize the student needs to move and actually move them around. I've seen teachers sometimes have students help them rearrange the room or even a teacher I watched one time who had a little boy who had two desks in the room. Every once in a while she'd just prompt him to go from his first desk to his second desk. The game plan was when he did that, he took all the stuff that was in the first desk to the second one. Just by getting up and moving that stuff, it made all the difference for him.

I think sometimes we can give an assignment to a student who is having difficulty just by breaking it down in steps rather than giving them a four part set of directions. To say, "let me ask you to do this first." And, "I'll be back to check with you in five minutes and then we'll take step two." I think sometimes students, especially for example with learning disabilities would do a task just fine if we could the directions on tape or if we had an expert of the day who could read directions when somebody needed it or summarized them but for them, the directions just turn into a mush by the time they'd finished reading them. Lots of students with disabilities would do much better if we did what folks now call "front-loading vocabulary." That is to make sure that again, we've determined the most critical vocabulary for the science that

we're working on right now or the history or the math. We teach that vocabulary upfront, very carefully before the unit ever begins, to make sure that students who aren't going to pick it up on their own. This sometimes means teaching it to a small group, not the whole class. Make sure they really have the vocabulary and a context for it so that they don't get lost in the unit. Sometimes kids with disabilities do much better if they can have reading partners to read text with rather than having to read it completely on their own.

There's lots of kids, including students learning English who but not always that, who can explain something to us if they can do it with a drawing or diagram and a few words to explain it but who can't necessarily write a page about it.

There are kids who, if we gave them a check list, this is what needs to come in by next Friday, first do this and check it off, then do this and check it off, then do this and check it off and they actually had a sequence to follow would do much better than having to envision those steps all themselves.

JULIE:

Right.

CAROL:

You can kind of figure thinking about, kind of point me a different direction.

JULIE:

Right, because I don't want to put kids with disabilities in a separate category from everybody else because they are a part of the natural landscape of classroom diversity.

CAROL:

Absolutely.

To me, one of the things that I struggle against is, I don't think you can say all kids with handicapping conditions need "X." What you find is that you have a student with a learning disability who really needs some particular vocabulary help right now but so do two other kids who just don't like words and another kid who has a home situation that doesn't lend itself to much support and another kid who had flu last week and two other who are learning English for the first time. One of the real principles of differentiation is that you don't label kids. You look for particular needs. You'll find a particular need that cuts across all kinds of kids much of the time. I think to me again, the emphasis isn't on, "Oh my goodness, here's a student learning English," therefore she'll definitely need "X." It's that on going assessment again. Where's the target? And, not getting there without some help and beyond that, who is already past it that I need to give some help to so they're not marching in place. Yes, I agree absolutely about that.

JULIE:

Terrific, in one of publications you talk about the artful teaching and it's a triangle and you've got teacher and the content and the student. Just a little framework for how this all works together, could you address that?

CAROL:

Actually, I realized that idea once when I was watching a very talented high school teacher teach. What I mean by that is, he was a young man who really knew mathematics which was his subject. He understood it very, very, well. He was a young man who didn't have any difficulty figuring out the big ideas, the understandings were and also had a really good capacity to connect math with the real world. And yet I watched him teach several days in a summer setting and realized that the kids were nearly comatose with something that certainly wasn't an excitement about learning. As I watched him, what I realized was that he was in love himself and he was in love with the subject matter but he wouldn't change very much if all the kids had left the room.

JULIE:

Ah!

CAROL:

It just occurred to me at that point that if you look at an equilateral triangle, the teacher is at the pinnacle of that if our job is to be the leader. On the one hand, our job really is not just to cover material but to be excited about history, to be excited about math or science or art. One leg of the triangle really, I think for our profession is getting more and more excited by the purposefulness of whatever it is we are trying to teach. Without sounding too much like a philosopher, a writer named Phil Phoenix said that human beings are born asking the question, "What is life and, who am I in it?" And we die asking that question, "What is life and, who am I in it?" He points out that at the time when human beings were able to leave the slaying the woolly mammoth and cooking it over the fire and had a little more leisure time on our hands that really in essence developed the disciplines to answer that question. The purpose of history is to answer the question, "What is life and who am I in it?" and that is also the purpose of art, music and science. The reason they're organized as they are is that each of those disciplines answers that question in a different way.

We lose sight of that in school. If we really love the subject that we teach, I think we'd love it because we see it's potential to answer that question.

On the left end leg of the equilateral triangle, though our other job is to be absolutely fascinated with and learn more and more not only about kids in general but particular kids. And so at best we sort of say to our selves, I have the coolest job in the world because I get to teach human beings that I like so much about this stuff that I like so much and that's really the bottom leg of the triangle. Teaching is connecting the kids that are cool with the stuff that's cool.

Differentiation happens when you say, and whatever it takes to make it work for each kid, I'll do that.

JULIE:

Exactly, your big question thing is kind of leading me to what might be our final question, I don't know.

We've talked an awful lot about why differentiating is an important way and an important thing to do. I shouldn't say it's a thing but it's an important approach. It's a beneficial approach to many children. What we haven't really spent any time talking about is what we are differentiating and how we're doing that. Could you maybe just take a couple minutes and kind of clarify some of those?

CAROL:

Let me see if I'm answering what you're asking me again if I'm not, be sure to redirect me.

When we talk about the content that we teach, let me back up again. There's typically, folks talk about five classroom elements that teachers can adapt. Five malleable classroom elements: content, process, product, affect, and learning environment. We can differentiate all three of those things. We do that... I mean I'm sorry, all five of those things and you base it on students, based on three things: students readiness, their interest, and how they learn. For me, I've gotten more interested in kind of trying to address the readiness, interest and learning profile piece because again, that's the student. Where is the student's readiness level? What does she like? What turns him off? What ways do they learn best? When you look at the five classroom elements that we can differentiate, content is one those and typically content means two things. It either means the stuff that kids need to learn or how they get access to the stuff. The rule of thumb is, you very seldom actually differentiate the stuff. That's particularly true with the big ideas, the essential understandings of the discipline. Except for students who have such extreme handicapping conditions that they're individualized plan suggests that they should not deal with the regular curriculum. Our assumption is that all kids should be focused on those essential understandings. If the kid is lacking some knowledge or skill, you may have to go backwards and teach them some old stuff at the same time you go forward and teach them the new stuff. If you have another kid who is already mastered the knowledge and skills, you may provide them with something more advanced. But typically what we're talking about when we are talking about differentiating the content is not the stuff, that means that if a standard is a standard it's a standard for everybody. But you can differentiate how they get access to the stuff so that some students might learn it much, much, better if you used a model and showed them something rather than just telling them. Or, some students might get it much, much, better if they can see how human beings use the information instead of just reading it in a book. Or, some students might get it much better if you made sure that you did both whole-to-part and part-to-whole instruction. So you differentiate access that way.

Process is a synonym for activities or I like the term where at Costa uses, sense making activities. You can differentiate activities from now till doomsday.

Products are how kids show you what they have learned over an extended period of time those are very easy to differentiate.

JULIE:

Here, you kind of have a focus on the multiple intelligences within the product.

CAROL:

Well, you know that's an interesting thing you should say that. We are going back full circle here now.

When you asked me the first question, conceptions and misconceptions of differentiation. I want to be real careful with this because I think the work that has been done on multiple intelligences has been very useful for us. It's shown us broader ways to think about kid's abilities. It has made us more flexible in that we some times try to think of two or ways we can let kids express something.

I don't want to belittle that. But multiple intelligences is really a very, very, small part of differentiation. It has nothing to do with readiness. If you explain it as Gardner explains it also has nothing to do with interest particularly. And, it's one small facet of learning profile. So when we say we do differentiation because we do multiple intelligences, it is sort of like saying I'm a cook because I make hot dogs. It is not that hot dog are going to kill you. It's just that there's a lot more out there, you know that you could eat. So, you can differentiate your teaching by using multiple intelligences. You can differentiate activities, products and that's fine but it's only a small portion of what needs to be addressed and only a small part of the repertoire that we have for doing it. Does that help at all?

Just to finish that cycle, when you talk about differentiating affect, we're back now to the connections with kids. Some kids really like you if you'll talk to them about the books that they read. Some kids like you to complement their clothes better. All kids need the sense of not so much self-esteem but self-efficacy, the sense that somebody is giving me something to do that required power and I was able to that, I was able to succeed. Different things will do that for different kids. Different things will make a classroom seem safe to different kids. That's sort of the sense of affective differentiation. Learning environment differentiation again, some students need more structure, some students need a little more freedom, some students will do better with less noise some students need to be able to work with a little more noise in the classroom. So all five of those elements: content, process, product, affect and learning environment are elements that are malleable to us as teachers that we can jiggle in order to help kids learn.

SHANNON:

I think you're right Julie, that was going to be our last question but what ever summary comments we've got we can take a minute for that.

JULIE:

I wish we more time to talk about differentiated instruction within the context of understanding by design because I know that you are into that area as well. I'm very happy that we able to get some clarification on what it is, what it isn't and most of all why it's a valid and helpful approach.

CAROL:

And really, that really is the crux. You don't need to give it a peculiar name. You don't need to make it something extraordinary. I think most of us when we went in to teaching really had that sense that it was a life shaping profession and that we can help kids become much, much, better people because of what we do. That's the purpose of differentiation, to help each of them grow as much as they can.

SHANNON:

I love the wholeness of that picture. So it's really about helping the whole child, the whole teenager become all that they might be, beyond where they are at the moment, holding a bigger vision and dream for them.

CAROL:

That's right. Cause' if they didn't need parents and teachers to do that they kind of grow themselves up like kittens do. You know we can take of them for two or three weeks and they'd be fine. Creatures need adults in their life that are very powerful and teachers have the second most power if not first most sometimes for some kids in making that happen.

JULIE:

Thank you for your chat Carol.

CAROL:

You're certainly welcome.

SHANNON:

Yes, thank you so much for your time Carol, I really appreciate your wisdom and Julie, wonderful questions.

So that's it for our conversation on differentiating instruction. I hope you decide to join us for future Effective Practice Briefings in this series.