



Connection Reflection

Differentiated Instruction and RTI

In the busy days and paths our lives take, it is sometimes good to think about our profession. Do you get the opportunity to think about instruction . . . how you teach and why people learn? Sometimes spending this kind of time gets lost in the daily treadmill of life! This issue of Connection Reflection focuses on differentiated instruction—one way of thinking about teaching and learning.

***Differentiated instruction** (sometimes referred to as **differentiated learning**) is a way of thinking about teaching and learning. When you differentiate instruction you are providing students with different ways to acquire content; to process, or make sense of ideas. Additionally, teaching products are created with the idea that all students within a classroom can learn effectively, regardless of differences in ability.*

So, differentiated instruction is a way for students to learn and for educators to assist, supervise, and guide learning. All too often, in our need for a definition, we come up with: differentiated instruction is a way to meet the needs of all students. Absolutely true! But, what exactly does this mean? Differentiated instruction is about different methods of teaching and learning for different students. It could be assignments that give students choices of their ultimate product. It may be about pretesting and then taking a student from a certain point in a subject and moving him/her forward—anyone remember SRAs? It could be about presenting a lesson in a variety of ways. According to Carol Ann Tomlinson (www.caroltomlinson.com), differentiated instruction is the process of "ensuring that what a student learns, how he/she learns it, and how the student demonstrates what he/she has learned is a match for that student's readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning."

At SET Connections, we see differentiated instruction working alongside the RTI (Response to Intervention) initiative. Isn't the idea of assuring every student is successful what both are about? Isn't RTI an intervention to differentiate instruction for the students who are not as successful as we would like? Connecting this, RTI and differentiated instruction/learning go hand-in-hand.

Tech Forum a Success

Several SET Connections members attended **Tech Forum** on Friday, April 24, at the Hyatt Woodfield in Schaumburg, Illinois. The keynote speaker was Clarence Fisher from Snow Lake, Manitoba, Canada, a small, rural community. He integrates technology into

daily classroom life and connects his middle school classroom to the world. He is an educator who does not allow geographic location to limit classroom experiences.

Dr. Henry Thiele, SET Connections President, **Scott Meech** and **Jon Orech**

presented "Creative Collaboration Using 21st Century Tools". Collaborative authoring, cooperative learning, and personal learning networks were a few of the topics they discussed.

Dr. Thiele also moderated an

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Special points of interest:

- There are a variety of ways to differentiate instruction.
- RTI utilizes differentiated instruction—they go hand-in-hand.
- Start small when implementing differentiated instruction in your classroom.

Vancouver, Washington, Nails RTI/Differentiated Instruction

By: **Dr. Henry Thiele**
President



Dr. Henry Thiele

Editor's Note: After Dr. Thiele attended the National School Board Association's Technology and Learning Conference, in October 2008, he spoke highly of an RTI program in Vancouver, Washington. We asked that he share the information gathered from this presentation as it not only addresses RTI but also speaks to using Differentiated Instruction to meet the needs of students. We hope you will gain some information from his experience!

Vancouver Public Schools in Vancouver, Washington, have differentiation and RTI figured out. They did it without federal mandates or arm twisting. They did it because they believed that meeting the needs of each and every child is what education is all about.

I had the opportunity to hear several of their teachers, administrators, and technology staff speak at the NSBA T+L conference last October. This group explained how they just naturally do RTI and then differentiated instruction in their district. The vision for this process is clearly spelled out on page 22 of their 481-page "Framework for Curriculum Instruction and Assessment" where they explain:

All students benefit from a personalized learning approach that incorporates the process of screening, diagnosis, prescription, intervention, monitoring of progress, and certification of progress as an on-going component of instructional planning and delivery. Professional development will be provided in support of the personalized learning process and



differentiation necessitated by the range of learners in each classroom.

Vancouver Public Schools takes the time to make an individualized learning plan—similar to an IEP—for every student in their district. In the early grades a team of educational professionals including teachers,

administrators, and specialists meet several times during the year to discuss each student. In these collaborative meetings they discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each student. In doing so, they ask the following questions:

- What is the current level of understanding and skill of the student as it pertains to the intended learning objectives?
- How do you know this to be true?
- What assessments (both formative and summative) and observations support your beliefs?
- What is the level of motivation of the student related to learning the identified content and skill?
- Does the student demonstrate interest?
- Does the student demonstrate previous knowledge or schema that will support this new learning?
- How will you help this student utilize prior knowledge to make connections that will support this new learning?

While in these meetings key information is recorded into a data warehouse/planning tool that has been developed by their in-house programming staff. This is where they also record

the interventions and strategies that will be used with each student to keep them challenged and engaged as they move forward in their learning.

In the upper grades the same system is used to look for indicators (i.e. truancy, slipping grades, and discipline issues) to proactively predict which students might need extra individual interventions. The indicators have been selected through careful analysis of past data. Team meetings similar to those described above occur to discuss specific needs for these students as well.

As Vancouver Public School professionals discussed their system of support, a few key traits to its success were evident:

- Vision
- Collaboration
- Technology



As we all head in the direction of trying to meet the differing needs of each student, we can all learn from a district that is already getting it done.

Differentiated instruction and meeting RTI can appear daunting and impossible at times, but if we get to the heart of it - doing what is right for **every one** of our kids - it is impossible to deny that this is not a good idea.

As a father of two children I certainly hope that every school they attend and every teacher they have will look at each of them as an individual who is in their care and will do their very best to consider their individual, personal needs. Thanks to the Vancouver Public Schools we know it can and is happening. They have shown us the key is a staff devoted to collaboration and some technology to handle the heavy lifting.

Differentiated Instruction and RTI are Partners

By: **Judy Okazaki**
Executive Director



RTI is married to differentiated instruction.

RTI is married to differentiated instruction; they are partners working together. Because each student is different, differentiated instruction allows RTI to happen. Further RTI is realistically possible because of today's technology.

The RTI Action Network states that: "RTI holds the promise of ensuring that all children have access to high-quality instruction, and that struggling learners—including those with learning disabilities—are identified, supported, and served early and effectively." Each student has different traits. Students vary in interests, academic skill sets, language proficiencies, organization skills, learning styles (such as audio, visual, kinesthetic, tactile, etc.), personalities, social/emotional development, intelligences, learning difficulties, attention spans and motivation levels. Looking at the various traits clearly illustrates how students vary as individuals. The need for and the value of differentiated instruction becomes quickly apparent.

Further, "Educators can differentiate four elements of instruction: content, process, product and learning environment." (as stated by *Grace Smith and Stephanie Throne*, authors of [Differentiated Instruction With Technology](#).)

Content is what is taught, process is how it is taught, product is what a

student produces to be evaluated and finally learning environment is the where and who; who being the student alone, with a partner, in a group, with the teacher, with the class. By looking at elements of instruction the possibilities for variation become visible.

Many educators don't need to be sold on differentiated instruction. In fact, if you look around, you will find examples from many who are implementing it formally or informally. For some educators the need may be obvious but the practicality for implementation may be questioned. For other educators, implementation involves a new way of teaching; for others, there is simply a learning curve to become comfortable with technologies. It is important, however, to keep in mind that the result is that all students can be more successful.



The concept of differentiated instruction has always existed. Formally it has been around for at least the past thirty-five years. However, the advanced technologies that we have today were previously not available to support implementation due to limits on time and tools available. Today we can utilize multimedia - i.e. taping a lecture vs. taking notes, watching a video at one's own speed as opposed to sitting in class for a lecture, typing as opposed to writing. Software packages and customized programs provide other opportunities. Web 2.0 tools - i.e. calendars, assignment trackers, mind mapping, surveys, to name a few, are other examples of support. Hardware such as laptops,

netbooks, digital cameras, document cameras, cell phones and digital projectors allow us to support individual differences.



Judy Okazaki

If you're sold on the need for differentiating instruction as the key for developing RTI but aren't quite sure how it can be realistically implemented. The first suggestion is to not get overwhelmed. Start small to address a particular area of learning, a particular subject area or a particular type of learning need. As your experiences grow in working with students as individuals so will your successes.

SET Connections Members Present on a Variety of Topics

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e-mail archiving round table discussion. **Judy Okazaki**, Executive Director, moderated a round table about differentiated instruction while **Alice Schmitz**, Director of Education and Professional Development, moderated one on RTI. Educators representing a variety of school districts in our state as well as surrounding states brought insight, questions, and concerns to the roundtables. An opportunity to share with other educators about resources, plans and ideas proved fruitful. Exhibits, time to connect during breaks and lunch, and prize giveaways completed the day.

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Differentiated Instruction/Learning means that . . .

Each student has different traits.
Students vary in:

- interests
- academic skill sets
- language proficiencies
- organization skills
- learning styles
- personalities
- social/emotional development
- intelligences
- learning difficulties
- attention spans
- motivation levels

Differentiated Instruction—What Do I Do Next?



Alice Schmitz

By: **Alice Schmitz**
Director of
Education and
Professional
Development

Differentiated
Instruction. I
understand the term.
I understand the

concept. I buy into the idea. But, **HOW** will I do this in my class? Different students working on different projects—isn't that a nightmare to manage! Yes! As Judy Okazaki stated in her article on the previous page, it can be overwhelming.

I'm wondering if this isn't why we're all worried about RTI. We are overwhelmed and want some "magic"! I don't think we'll find any "magic," but I do think there are a lot of technology resources out there that can be helpful.

Ms. Okazaki mentioned software and hardware in her article. Look for software titles in your District before resorting to time-consuming titles on the web. Look for applications for:

- Calendars
- Assignment Trackers
- Mind Mapping
- Surveys

And, have you thought about procuring the following hardware. With some planning one or more items may be an option for you:

- Netbooks (they're priced right but check out the features for your application)
- Digital cameras (every classroom should have access to one or more)
- Document cameras (what a wonderful tool—I can't imagine teaching without one!)

- Cell phones (Be sure to abide by your District's rules on cell phones)

And finally, how do you manage this? One small step at a time. Pick a unit and try to give students options on how they learn. Maybe select the different learning styles as a way to differentiate and make the unit presentation a video or chart for the visual learners, a story or news article for those who like to learn verbally, or a group project for those who enjoy working with others. Yes, the instruction for this unit will need to be reworked. Could you plan with a colleague and share the workload? Could you do one unit before the end of this school year and make it a goal to rework another over the summer?

As a final step, let us know what you did and share your success. It would be helpful for other SET Connections members—info@setconnections.org.