

Universal Design for Learning: A Support for Changing Teacher Practice

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Abstract

Educational leadership is facing a need for change; this change requires innovative approaches such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to transform teacher practice. Principled modelling by these leaders is integral to sustained change. In addition, to initiate this change, traditional practices such as group work can be used with a UDL focus to show teachers that it is a natural and helpful change. Administrators need to leave the office and learn with students and teachers in order to demonstrate their commitment to group work skills. Administrators will help their communities by sharing their vision and by using instructional coaches.

Principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are effective strategies for helping educational leaders to be successful in supporting changes to teacher practice. Success can be defined as “meaningful, sustained change” (Knight, 2007, p. 200). UDL principles are in line with the moral behaviour put forward by the United Nations, which gave all people choice in their lives, and should inform a school’s mandate for change in teacher practice. An emphasis on group work is a logical starting point for these leaders, because teachers can see students develop the social skills and the thinking skills required in any course of study. A practical example of UDL showed how technology can augment group work, and it can show resistant teachers the difference between traditional group work and UDL group work. School administrators should also model themselves as learners, and they should reflect the collaborative social skills needed for group work. Leading new initiatives at a school requires the administrators to share control of this vision, as well. Instructional coaches are another leadership group that is instrumental for successful long-term change by modelling the principles of UDL in order to change practice. An instructional coach from a Manitoba public school division confirmed that UDL principles can help to build trusting, professional relationships for collaboration. Thus, teachers can change practice for the long term, if they see the value in using UDL for lesson planning because it is moral and because it reflects their school plan.

Moral UDL principles will help school leaders to change teacher practice, because these principles are reflected by the United Nations in that both seek to help vulnerable people live with choice (Ok, Rao, Bryant, & McDougall, 2017). This moral behaviour is integral to the “capability approach,” and should be considered in school plans to influence teacher practice, which is necessary for all students, including vulnerable students, to succeed because these people are treated with “human dignity and respect” (Toson, Burrello, & Knollman, 2013, pp. 490-491). This idea was reflected by the work of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (Harnacke, 2013). The CRPD’s goal was to give all people, including those with a disability, more freedom to live their lives without the denial of any rights. The CRPD used the work of Martha Nussbaum, based on the capabilities approach, in developing their goal (Harnacke, 2013). This theoretical framework was not only useful for the United Nations, but it was also helpful to educators because it set out to protect students from feeling vulnerable within a system or school (Toson et al., 2013). Thus, schools supported by the moral principles of UDL will have stronger mission statements that will support changes in classroom planning by teachers.

These stronger mission statements, underpinned by the moral principles of UDL, will further support changes to teacher practice because of the focus on social skills through group work. Students will require specific lessons prior to any group work, in order to “develop empathy for

others” (Katz, 2012, p. 48). In the past, UDL successfully utilized group work to create positive interactions, which were necessary for students at all levels to inform their thinking through dialogue. Positive interactions within a classroom that used group work as a strategy enabled each student’s voice to be given time and respect (Katz, 2012). This focus helped students to listen to other viewpoints, and it created an atmosphere in which students “develop(ed) critical thinking and analysis skills” (Katz, 2012, p. 18). Self-reflection was then achieved, which helped students to grow as learners as they focused on a complicated topic that required thoughtful conversation. Therefore, teachers can see by using a familiar practice, such as group work, that a UDL principle from their school’s mission statement reflects an intentional focus on social skills and that this focus will result in better student learning.

To further emphasize the powerful influence of UDL on planning, teachers will need to see a practical example of its use. UDL is a contrast to present classroom lesson planning and practice. UDL includes the needs of all learners in a classroom lesson, especially those students who have difficulty learning if UDL strategies are not present (Ok et al., 2017). For instance, one such UDL strategy that worked with all students used a commercial software or PowerPoint to scaffold the writing process. In this process, learners looked at one image at a time as they developed their ideas for their writing (Hitchcock, Rao, Chang, & Yuen, 2016). This process of writing an essay with slides breaks down the task into smaller guided chunks. Writing in a group setting during the PowerPoint slides resulted in positive feedback from educators toward learners, and there was more frequent sharing of information by students. This use of technology and group work showed that planning for all students helped with “reducing barriers to learning” (Ok et al., 2017, p. 117). When all students are included in a lesson, the classroom becomes a stronger community that could help all students with their learning engagement (Ok et al., 2017). Learners who use unique strategies that incorporate technology, along with group work, may become more involved in the lesson. These strategies will help teachers to see the practical benefits of UDL.

Similarly, administrators, as part of the learning community of a school, need to show that they are willing to learn collaboratively from students and teachers (Fullan, 2014). Therefore, in effect, collaboration or group work is being modelled by another educator to build a stronger learning relationship wherein risks can take place (Alvarez-Bell, Wirtz, & Bian, 2017; Ok et al, 2017). If a principal participates visibly in a collaborative process, then students and teachers will see the results of this collaboration working at all levels. The administrative team is vital to successful programs at any school (Sterrett & Irizarry, 2015). For teachers to seek improvement, they need to know that they are part of plan that their administrators value. These administrators need to model “improving and refining instructional practice” (Fullan, 2015, p. 4). Thus, traditional barriers are broken down with modelling, because students, teachers and administrators are modelling the social skills necessary for group work and collaboration used in UDL.

Schools that seek a new shared vision of their approach to education need to share control of this vision with each of the stakeholders who will experience change (Sergiovanni, 2017). All individuals involved in this change will feel empowered if they are informed and if they are given opportunities to make decisions that logically fit their roles (Fullan, 2015). Each school will have its unique vision, which needs to account for government assessments and the needs of the community (Sergiovanni, 2017). In order for students to learn, they need to build authentic and respectful relationships with the educators at their school, which include administrators and teachers. This support will help teachers and students to feel that they are part of a school that values a “deep culture of teaching and learning” (Sergiovanni, 2017, “School Culture,” para. 5). These relationships work more effectively if the students have “control of their education” (Capp, 2017, p. 793). Learners require choice, because each student possesses a variety of strengths that need to be recognized. Through implementing choice, students are given the opportunity to build “intrinsic motivation” (Capp, 2017, p. 793). For these reasons, each part of a school’s plan

must reflect the community's need for control in the education of its children, and they need to feel part of the school's vision.

Another role that can aid in modelling the proper programming for students, but more importantly for teachers, is an instructional coach position to support the change in programming put forth by the administration team. The instructional coach can provide a link between students, teachers, and administrators because this person will provide "opportunities to see the new practice performed" (Knight, 2007, p. 110). Before instructional coaches can introduce a change to traditional practice for a classroom teacher, they must build relationships so that teachers who are entrenched in a traditional teaching approach will seek help because they see the instructional coach as an ally. The external help must build the trust necessary for resistant teachers to accept help and to begin to change their practice. The external help must be seen by the classroom teacher as focused on improvement of student learning (Knight, 2007). This shift in thinking on the part of the teacher means that the teacher is committed to a "responsibility for continuous improvement" (Fullan, 2015, p. 4). If teachers have accepted their role as learners, then they will seek out help due to a genuine interest to enhance their teaching. A successful change from known practice can take place only within a school in which change is accepted and supported by the school administrator (Fullan, 2015). Therefore, instructional coaches can be successful once trust is gained from teachers.

Francie,¹ an active instructional coach, confirmed that she can help teachers with change, but the relationships need to be built first (personal communication, November 20, 2017). Francie was assigned during the 2016-17 school year the task of working alongside teachers at a Manitoba high school, in order to aid these teachers in the development of a number of new initiatives that included UDL. According to Francie, it was difficult to work with teachers at first, because teachers either did not feel the need to make any changes to their programming, or they did not know how she could support them and consequently their students. Despite this, Francie built a relationship with one English teacher, by gaining his trust. Control was given to this classroom teacher in terms of how Francie would help during a unit of study around the theme of identity for a grade nine English class. A male student was resistant to the English teacher, because the unit was too difficult. Francie provided support by creating UDL lessons, and she held meetings with the teacher to ensure that the teacher felt comfortable with the materials and activities. During these meetings, an Identity Literature Circle Google Document was created and shared with other like-minded English teachers from across the division. This gave the teacher an opportunity to collaborate with others working on the same unit and a space to work on a lesson tailored to the student who was struggling. The English teacher created an activity open to all students, but because it involved drawing, the struggling student could complete the task, and he felt success. Therefore, this program was successfully implemented by the instructional coach, because Francie worked hard to earn the trust needed to build the teacher's confidence by helping a struggling student to overcome a challenge with UDL.

In conclusion, the use of UDL principles by educational leaders can support changes to teacher practice if the teachers see it as helping students because it is part of a school plan. Change can be easier to facilitate and accepted if change is in line with values set out by international organizations such as the United Nations. Teachers will also accept new practices when a traditional practice, such as group work where social skills and thinking skills are developed, is bridged with new practices. As an example of new teaching practice, UDL will use group work and technology to ensure that inclusion occurs. School administrators need to model the collaborative skills needed for change to occur. Of course, any changes to traditional teaching need the stakeholders to have control, and they need input to build a school's vision. Finally, instructional coaches are needed to support new initiatives, so that these practices last as part of a school plan. The instructional coaches need to build relationships with teachers for

¹ A pseudonym has been used to protect this person's identity.

change to occur. Therefore, school leaders who wish to see lasting change to better practice from traditional models need to provide moral support for their teachers by using UDL as a philosophical foundation for a school plan; in addition, these leaders need to provide vision and then model the desired changes to teacher practice.

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