Designing UDL with Equity

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Abstract: *Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for designing lessons that is grounded in data and recognized as best practice under IDEA and ESSA. The use of the method allows for greater intervention with students socially, emotionally, and academically. UDL allows intentional and purposeful work with populations that are normally marginalized and at risk. UDL lesson planning creates an environment that addresses the least restrictive environment, is culturally responsive, and allows an environment that is trauma informed for all students.*

Keywords: UDL, lesson design, special education, equity

Teachers have various means of acknowledging the differences among learners in their classrooms. Understanding these differences can help close the gap between learner and curriculum (Torres & Rao, 2019). Using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) allows teachers to provide access in multimodal ways of curriculum for students. It is not an accommodation of curriculum, rather, it helps to create curriculum that accommodates all learning styles and abilities. UDL is widely used in the special education classroom but has implications for general education classrooms and beyond. UDL classrooms strive to provide variability to allow students to achieve all goals with adequate support and challenge. All students can be expert learners if barriers are removed and opportunities for differentiation are provided.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a comprehensive framework that addresses the diverse needs of learners, particularly those who are often marginalized in educational settings. UDL is rooted in the principles of Universal Design (UD), which originated in architecture to ensure accessibility for all individuals. This framework has been embraced in education to support diversity and learner variability by providing a structure for designing instruction that benefits all students (Morton & Pilgrim, 2023). Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced the No Child Left Behind Act, has endorsed UDL numerous times as a framework to ensure that all students experience success (Chardin & Novak, 2021).

Research in neuroscience and cognitive science has informed the development of UDL, which is based on three core principles: multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression (Hall et al., 2012). These principles emphasize the importance of offering flexible ways to present information, engage with content,

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and express understanding. By doing so, UDL aims to eliminate barriers to learning and move away from a "one-size-fits-all" approach to education.

UDL recognizes that students come to the classroom with diverse needs, abilities, talents, interests, and experiences. A core idea guiding UDL is to consider barriers in the environment as opposed to assuming deficits within the learner (Tucker-Smith, 2023). The framework ensures that students with disabilities or those who are gifted receive the necessary support to succeed and participate fully in their learning. In contrast to traditional differentiation, which provides alternative learning processes for students, UDL empowers students to self-differentiate. For example, in the case of summarizing a book, students might choose to create a model, set a learning goal, or write a comic strip, thereby fostering independence and ownership of their learning process. The purpose of using UDL as a framework to support students and proactively make the learning environment accessible and supportive of learner choice at the start of a lesson instead of constantly trying to refit instruction mid-stream (Cumming & Rose, 2021).

Several studies have explored the impact of UDL on equity in education. For instance, research by Smith et al. (2017) found that implementing UDL principles in the classroom led to increased engagement and achievement among diverse learners, including those with disabilities. Another study by Jones et al. (2018) highlighted that UDL can effectively address the needs of English language learners by providing multiple means of representation and expression. These studies underscore the potential of UDL to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments. Essentially, UDL is a framework that supports the diverse needs of all learners by providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression. Research indicates that UDL can enhance equity in education by accommodating the variability of learners and empowering them to take ownership of their learning.

WHAT DOES UDL LOOK LIKE?

UDL in action can take on many forms. In general, classrooms using UDL have learning goals for students that are posted and clearly defined. These need to be posted so that the goal can be accessed in a text to speech program or graphics program. Each learning goal that is presented should be stepped so each step in the process is accessed individually to assist in organization, as well as scaffolded. Scaffolding of engagement takes on many forms and can be determined by their complexity and responsiveness from students. Some simpler ways include supporting student risk taking with their work and providing examples and non-examples for a concept. The use of the UDL framework during lesson-planning allows teachers to proactively differentiate lessons based on demonstrated student needs (Kelly & Tanner-Anderson, 2018). Presenting authentic and relevant examples can give students a concrete way to begin to engage with the content or topic in which they are to demonstrate their learning. Educators also need to ensure all resources and supports are in place to complete the task. Having necessary items and supports will help ensure the student meets their goal. Lastly, built in time needs to be put into place and planned for so the student can actively reflect on the learning and engagement. This time is crucial so that students are provided the opportunity to reflect on their learning.

UDL lesson design comes in many forms. Educators may find having students create a podcast, video, or WebQuest can be a small way to incorporate the framework into their curriculum and assessment practices. Creating comic strips, video quizzes for peers or a Kahoot! Game are other ways students can participate in their demonstration of understanding. Other ideas include

graphic outlines, keyboard talk-to-type applications with spelling supports, multimedia presentations, models, drawings, or photography.

USING UDL WITH EQUITY

In her book Antiracism and Universal Design for Learning, author Andratesha Fritzgerald (Fritzgerald, 2020), identified components for when UDL is used with equity.

1. Students are more important than the system.
2. Students are more important than our personal experiences.
3. Students are more important than content packaging.
4. We share that we are willing help them reach goals with buy in and relationships.
5. We will provide instructions that holds you accountable and empowers you to take ownership of your learning.

Providing educators with these components can help them plan ways to use equitable planning in conjunction with UDL in their classrooms. When looked at through the lens of equity, students become the focus, and in that is when real growth and powerful learning occurs.

Educators play a crucial role in fostering a learning environment that encourages students to become motivated, purposeful, resourceful, and strategic learners, aligning with the objectives of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). It is essential to recognize that implementing UDL is not an automatic guarantee of equitable practices. Rather, it is a step towards creating a more inclusive classroom by designing learning experiences with all students in mind, thereby working to eliminate inequities (Chardin & Novak, 2021). The UDL framework emphasizes the importance of identifying and addressing barriers to ensure equal access and engagement. Currently, educational systems often fail to support all students equally, as they are not designed to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners, but instead cater to the needs of privileged or "average" students who face minimal barriers. One of the most important aspects of the UDL pedagogy recommendations focuses on encouraging students to develop metacognitive and academic self-regulatory strategies (Jacobsen & Giblen, 2023). By adopting the UDL approach, educators can provide multiple ways for students to engage, represent, and demonstrate their learning. This approach not only helps instructors understand the essence of the material they are teaching but also enables them to adapt the content to meet the needs of all learners, including those with special needs, thereby fostering a more inclusive learning environment (Super et al., 2021).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) with an equity lens requires thoughtful planning and a willingness to adapt. Teachers can start by integrating UDL principles into their existing lesson plans, focusing on small, manageable changes that enhance accessibility and inclusivity (Takemae et al., 2022). It is important to recognize that not every UDL guideline will be applicable to every lesson, so teachers should select strategies that align with their specific objectives and the needs of their students.

One effective approach is to incorporate diverse instructional methods and materials, such as technology, music, videos, movement, and hands-on activities. These varied formats can cater to different learning styles and preferences, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to engage with the content. For example, teachers can introduce vocabulary words with a UDL mind-

set. Ask students what a square might look like, smell like, taste like, feel like, or sound like, based upon a digital or real image. This type of questioning employs all the senses to provide students different neural pathways to engrain concepts into their long-term memory (Dieker et al., 2022). Teachers should be observant and responsive to their students' natural inclinations and interests, which can guide the selection of appropriate UDL strategies based on the grade level and subject matter. Several digital tools, tricks, and tips aligned with the concept of UDL are available to address equity issues for students with language-based needs can provide a wider range of options for how students choose to learn concepts (Dieker et al., 2022).

One valuable resource is CAST.com is a great source for educators seeking to deepen their understanding of UDL and discover practical tools for implementation. Additionally, the book Universal Design for Learning: Theory and Practice, available for free on the CAST website, offers comprehensive insights into the framework and its application in diverse educational settings, not just special education.

Creating a collaborative and enjoyable learning environment is crucial for the success of UDL. Teachers should encourage student participation in the planning of UDL lessons, fostering a sense of ownership and agency in their learning. Achieving the promise of equitable education requires purposefully challenging underlying values, so that schools can move from prioritizing assimilation to promoting agency, and to foster connection (Tucker-Smith, 2023). This collaborative approach can strengthen the teacher-student relationship and enhance the learning experience for both parties. By embracing the principles of UDL and equity, educators can create more inclusive classrooms that support the success of all learners.

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