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Recognize teachers' diverse experiences when implementing Universal Design for Learning strategies

By Katie Novak

One warm, windy day in 1996, my high school biology teacher gave the class an assignment that would change my perspective on education forever. Teaching a unit on the circulatory system, he mixed things up: Instead of requiring a test or report to show what we knew, we were offered the voice and choice to show him what we learned in whatever way we wanted.

I teamed up with a friend and got creative. We spent a full day perfecting our project. The following week, we dressed in red from head to toe and rapped the lyrics to our new song, "What Is Blood?" to the class. I still remember the lyrics—and all of the characteristics of blood. What might have gone in one ear and out the other has stuck with me for decades.

Today, I know that the principles behind that assignment are those now endorsed by federal legislation to ensure equity for all students: Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Promoting Equitable Learning

An educational framework built upon decades of research on the relationship between learning and the brain, UDL allows educators to remove barriers to learning by offering voice and choice. When we provide students with such agency, we allow them to be more engaged and creative, providing a platform for more meaningful, deeper learning that is culturally sustaining and linguistically appropriate. This, in turn, produces education that's more equitable and inclusive.

UDL recognizes that students come from diverse backgrounds and have diverse learning needs, or "variability." When we design flexible lessons and offer multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression, we can create "expert learners"—students who are purposeful and motivated, resourceful and knowledgeable, strategic and goal-directed.

As with students, there is considerable variability among educators, and implementing

UDL will come more easily to some than to others. Our job as educational leaders is to ensure that all are provided with the necessary support and guidance to be successful. We must model UDL best practices and provide teachers with firm goals and flexible means for achieving those goals.

Engage for Efficacy

John Hattie's Visible Learning studies show that collective teacher efficacy is one of the most important factors in implementing change. To be successful, teachers must believe they have the ability to teach all students and that parents, administrators, and students are doing their best.

To help ensure teacher efficacy, leaders must provide multiple means of engagement. Educators need to see the data, the research, and the success stories that come with high self-efficacy and inclusion. We need to stimulate their interest by showing them why change is necessary and how the practices we recommend are relevant to them. We need to provide tools to help them persist even when initial attempts fail, and we must foster a community where they can learn and inspire one another.

Implementation of new initiatives often starts by engaging early adopters, powering through periods of disengagement and frustration, and proving through data that the systems are effective. Subsequently, other staff members will become more engaged.

Implementation is hard work, and periods of disengagement and disillusionment are normal parts of the process. Having a strong, inspiring leader who is dedicated to modeling the practices he or she promotes is always an asset to a school or district when things get difficult.

Modeling effective UDL practices involves giving teachers voice and choice in how they learn about the UDL framework. UDL guidelines remind us how to do this:

■ Recruit teachers' interest by providing a forum where they can share current challenges in the classroom and offer examples of how UDL might help them address those challenges. Encourage everyone to share strategies for eliminating a barrier.

■ Create a "safe space" for educators to share their ideas and feedback by minimizing threats and distractions. A great prompt

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might be, "If someone—not any of you, of course—were going to say implementation would be difficult, why would they say that?"

- Offer strategies and resources for coping when implementation isn't going as smoothly as expected. Use mindfulness exercises, professional learning communities, and open forums at staff meetings.
- Embrace feedback by modeling the importance of voice. At the end of every faculty meeting and professional development session, ask colleagues, "What is one thing I could do differently in the design of this meeting to increase engagement?" and suggest the sentence starter, "It would be cool if …"

Flexibility in Representation

How do you learn best? Do you prefer to watch a video, read a book, participate in a discussion, watch a lecture, read a blog, or listen to a podcast? Each of your educators has their own unique learning profile and may prefer certain media.

When providing professional development to our educators, we must practice what we preach by offering firm goals but flexible means. If we deliver information in a one-size-fits-all fashion in professional development or faculty meetings, what kind of message are we sending about UDL? The following are tips based on the UDL guidelines for representation:

- Provide a variety of rich resources, including scheduled time to support implementation. A book club is not for everyone!
- Clarify complex language surrounding UDL, and offer tools and supports to help "unpack" its guidelines and checkpoints.
- Offer multiple media, such as visuals, videos, and audio materials to support learning

before, during, and after professional development and instructional coaching sessions.
- Activate background knowledge by making explicit connections to UDL and other pedagogy your staff is familiar with.

Measuring Progress

Providing mastery-oriented feedback to teachers is a wonderful way to model UDL practices. Allow them to use tools such as CAST's UDL Progression Rubric to self-assess. By providing regular opportunities for feedback and encouraging teachers to provide feedback to each other, you can create a culture of growth and acceptance. Here are more ways to help model multiple means of action and expression:

- Allow multiple methods for teachers to provide feedback on how implementation is going. Exit tickets, Google forms, establishment of leadership teams, and one-on-one meetings are good options.
- Provide ongoing opportunities for staff to improve their practice and self-reflect. Could you encourage interaction journals, facilitate data meetings, or look at student work protocols?
- Provide self-assessment tools and graduated levels of support such as the UDL Progression Rubric so teachers can reflect on their teaching and set goals for improvement.
- Once teachers select areas in which they want to implement UDL, check on the progress of those goals regularly through informal coffee meetings, notes of encouragement, and classroom walk-throughs.

Implementation of a new initiative takes a village. By modeling UDL's best practices through professional development and ongoing support, you will eventually create an atmosphere in which each educator lives and breathes UDL. ▣

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