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Welcome to the Education Table, a podcast where I answer your questions about inclusive and innovative education in 10 minutes or less with stories, stats and research, and practical strategies. I'm your host, Katie Novak, and today's question is one I get all the time what is one thing I can redesign right now to make learning more inclusive? So let's dive in with a story. When I was teaching middle school, I started my class the same every day. I would greet students at the door, and they were expected to get started at the do now written on the whiteboard. When I got my teaching degree, every lesson plan I designed had to begin with an activator. So I got in the habit of doing that from the get go. And it was so much a part of my routine, I didn't think much about it anymore.

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It was a hustle for me, definitely, to write it on the board every day, but it was important, right? But here's the problem. Some of my students literally never completed it. They struggled to decode the prompt. They were too far from the board to see it well, or had difficulty rewriting the instructions. Others didn't know the answer to the question I posed or didn't know where to start. One student once told me, Ms. Novak, the do now gives me anxiety. There is no way to finish that in two minutes. Okay, so it wasn't working. But that was the moment I realized the routine was actually a barrier for some of my students. So I asked myself, how could I redesign just this one routine using udl?

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My first step was not going to be to overhaul an entire lesson, but rather look at that established routine so that students would have more flexibility and more autonomy every day. Now, why does this work? Let's dive into the research. Let's talk about the power of routines for a second. A 2023 meta analysis by Patel and colleagues looked at classroom structure across dozens of studies, and what did they find? When routines are clear, predictable, and intentionally taught, students show higher academic achievement, increased engagement, and greater confidence in their own abilities. Why? Because routines reduce decision fatigue. They free up working memory, which is limited at best, and they help some students predict what comes next. So, honestly, I get it. I can't even tell you how thrown off I am when my routines are off. I am like a robot.

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From the moment I wake up in the morning. If I go to pour my coffee and realize I'm out of creamer, my brain kind of short circuits and I have to stop and reassess and think about what to do next. And that's what happens to many students when routines are not clear. So once we have routines, we can begin to think about how to make them work better for everyone. And that is the real power of udl. So let's dive into some strategies that you can incorporate right away into an existing routine that you have. So what does this look like in practice to create more flexible routines in your learning environment? Let's go back to my do now activator example.

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Here's how I redesigned that one using UDL Step one Offer Multiple Means of Access so the first thing I did was I started thinking about barriers and who wasn't able to access the routine as I intended in a really inclusive class. I

learned quickly that having everything written, particularly on a glossy whiteboard, excluded some learners. And luckily technology then and now makes it much easier to make this accessible. So instead of just writing the prompt on the board, I transitioned to using a daily presentation that started with the Do Now. And the do now would ask students to review the target objective for the lesson or unit and then prepare for learning.

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Students could read the slide which was projected, or they knew they could access the presentation in the learning management system and then use accessibility tools like font enlargers or text to speech. I also always gave students the option to work together in partners or in small groups so one person could read it out loud. The simple act of allowing students to read or listen to the prompt included so many more learners by design and it didn't require me to change the prompt. The second thing I learned was the importance of embracing repeated routines. I realized that although it was more accessible, I still had to come up with a new prompt every single day. And that didn't really reflect the purpose of do now, which really was for me to get students ready to learn.

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So instead of just projecting something random or a different prompt every day, I really started thinking about what is it that I want them to do? And it was to get ready to learn. Also, I shifted to not requiring them to start as soon as they got into the room. Rather, I started honoring the transition time and when the bell rang, that's when we started. So as soon as the class started, I would then display the do now and I would give them options for how they wanted to prepare to learn. So one option was always to review their notes from the previous day. Because if you're teaching students, young learners, if you ask them what did we do yesterday? A lot of them will just stare at you blankly.

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Another was to write down or chat with a partner about what they knew about the day's objective, and if they were absent or didn't have any background knowledge of what we did the day before or what were working on, they could meet with me for a quick three minute meeting. It did take a while for students to get used to this routine, but in the long run, it was so much simpler for me because all I had to do for the prompt was essentially post the day's learning objective, which I was doing already and I wasn't having to come up with an additional prompt for that.

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So in that three minutes, there were options for accessing the prompt, there were options for collaboration or very brief targeted instruction with me, and there were options to activate background knowledge by going into the previous day's notes. Those options worked great. In my learning environment, the same options may not work for you. So definitely start to experiment with a routine that currently not everybody can access. So now here's the last and most important piece about universally designed routines. Before you provide all the options to learners, be sure to explicitly pre teach all of those options. We want students to reflect and select what works best for them, but it's very difficult to do that if you haven't explored all of the options or if you haven't had explicit guidance in what it looks like to make a really responsible choice.

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So before I could make this routine work really well for me, I had to explicitly teach students how to access the slides and use accessibility tools. I had to teach them how to use devices more responsibly without getting distracted and jumping into other tabs. And I had to teach them how to collaborate respectfully, which required a little bit of role playing at first and some sentence stems and redirection so they understood what it looked like to kind of turn and talk to a partner, to unpack the day's objective and to do a little bit of brainstorming. That upfront investment along with the options is what led to a routine that actually worked all year long.

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After about, you know, the first six weeks of really trying to hit the routine hard, because once we had it down, we could then move on to another routine. And so that helped me to build more flexible and inclusive classrooms one routine at a time. So again, we're going to start by thinking about multiple means of access. We're going to embrace repeated routines so students get a lot of practice. And lastly, we're going to make sure that we reteach all those routines. So let's dive into our closing. So for final thoughts, the most important thing to remember is that you do not or cannot have to transform everything all at once. That would be absolutely bananas and it would be totally unsustainable. Instead, start with one routine you use every single day.

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Like, maybe it's attendance, maybe it's notetaking, maybe it's do nows, maybe it's your exit tickets. And ask yourself the following questions. The first is who might this not work for? Who's being excluded from this? And then start thinking about what is one option I can add to make this work better for all learners. You can give them a little bit of flexibility. You can ask them which pathway is better for them. And then lastly is how do I explicitly teach students how to use all of those options responsibly? Answering these questions is really what UDL is all about. Small changes that create more flexible pathways for all learners. So for the next four to six weeks, focus on a single routine and help more students access and engage with that routine in meaningful ways.

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And in the long run, it will definitely create more balance for you. Thank you so much for joining me at the education table. If this episode got you thinking about routines in a new way, be sure to subscribe and do not miss what is next. And if you redesign a routine, please, please tell me about it. You can tag [atienovakudl](#) and use [redesigntheroutine](#). Until next time onward.