

Podcast Episode 32: UDL Focus Areas

Hi all. Welcome back to the Education Table. I'm Katie Novak and today the question that I'm going to answer is how do we know if we're doing UDL?

Or how do we know if UDL is actually being implemented? Now, let me be clear right from the start. This is not about evaluation.

It's not about compliance. Instead, it's about using a tool that helps you to create a baseline so that you can celebrate where you are and really start thinking more proactively about the growth that you can make so that teachers are better prepared to meet the needs of learners. Ultimately, this is about shifting instructional practice so that we can shift student engagement and student learning.

But alas, I am getting ahead of myself. Before I share more about a practical tool that my team and I created to support UDL walkthroughs and feedback, of course, I'm going to start with a story. Years ago, someone asked me what felt like the simplest question in the world.

Katie, what does it look like to actually universally design a classroom? And at that time, I didn't have a clear, concrete answer. Of course I could describe the framework and the guidelines and the considerations, but what did it look like in real classrooms across all grade levels, across all subjects, across all schools?

And that question launched what became a massive journey. Over the years, my incredible team and I have visited thousands of classrooms and we've watched and listened and learned. And what we found was really powerful.

In the classrooms where students were most engaged and had the most significant growth academically and throughout social emotional learning, we consistently saw the same patterns. Teachers were making goals very, very clear, providing flexible pathways and embedding lots of opportunities not only for voice and choice, but reflection and feedback. And they really were creating the conditions where every student could find a space to belong and thrive because the classroom supported multiple tasks and formats.

So out of that work grew the tool that I'm going to be talking about today. A set of UDL look fors organized around eight focus areas. We wanted to give schools a way to look for evidence of UDL without slipping into evaluation and compliance mode.

A way to notice and reflect and grow together. Because this is really important to build collective teacher efficacy. So let's take a moment to highlight some research.

Decades of studies in teacher education show that feedback, when it's specific and actionable and focused on growth, is one of the most powerful drivers of professional learning. John Hattie's meta analyses put the average effect size of feedback at 0.72. That's nearly double the 0.4 hinge point that represents a year of typical growth.

That is huge! But here's the catch. When feedback feels evaluative, that impact plummets.

Teachers who see walkthroughs and learning walks as compliance checks often report anxiety and less willingness to take instructional risks. That's why this tool is designed as a lens for reflection and growth, and it's not meant to be a rubric for performance. So how can you use this tool to drive feedback, reflection and have conversations around growth?

Let's dive into those strategies. So at some point you're going to explore this tool and I want you to know how you can use this in your practice. The first step is to really narrow your focus.

Before you go on learning walks or you partner with a teacher with instructional coaching, look at the full UDL look fors document and choose maybe one or two areas that you really want to focus on. It's great when you can sit with teachers and have them self assess and think about, yeah, that's an area I'd like to know more about. So maybe you choose focusing on really clear learning objectives, or maybe it's about increasing options for flexible assessments.

Whatever you choose, you want the scope to be narrow because this is about depth and not coverage. And it's important that everyone who is going to be involved in these learning walks really understands what the focus is going to be ahead of time so you're all on the same page. And then as you go into classrooms using this tool, you can begin to collect evidence.

But it's not about judgment. It's about low inference notes capturing exactly what you see and what you hear. So instead of saying things or noticing things like "great engagement," you might note "six students chose the graphic organizer, while 13 used sticky notes to plan.

They were all really on task." That kind of concrete evidence is what allows for really meaningful reflection with educators later. Sometimes you might also talk with students. The tool offers some optional questions like how do you decide what strategy to use when you're learning?

If student interviews fit school culture, asking one or two of these questions can be really powerful. And if it's not the right fit, no problem. Teachers can then use those same questions for reflection, for check ins, or even self assessment to triangulate their own self

awareness and perception with students.

The last step, after you've gone through and you've decided on the focus area, you've observed what you're seeing, you've aligned it to those focus areas. The last is to really debrief and reflect and plan. And this is where the magic happens.

Because ultimately we want to recognize when we see really effective strategies that support clarity and flexibility and student engagement. And it really matters because we have to really let teachers know that some of the things that they're doing are beautifully aligned with this framework, and we want to honor that. But ultimately, we also want to start noticing what can we do to grow in our practice.

So this is where you have to keep the tone really grounded in partnership. Because to introduce the next step, we want to invite collaboration. Our team loves the phrase "one thing that you might want to try next is..." because it really honors teacher autonomy while offering a really concrete idea that builds on their strengths.

And after naming an idea, we don't leave teachers on their own. We can say, you know what, let's partner together to co design that routine or strategy, or I'd love to come back in and see how it goes. Because we ultimately want to support that next step.

We want to coach teachers from where they are to being more inclusive and more flexible because we want students to build more independence and engagement. So when you use this tool this way, it stops being a checklist or an evaluation and becomes a shared tool for noticing and celebrating and growing together. So here's the thing.

When you work with educators around building a culture and climate that embraces UDL and really focuses on some of these areas, walkthrough feedback will not feel like an audit. It doesn't have to make teachers brace themselves or wondering if they're measuring up, because we have to shift our lens when we walk into classrooms saying, this really is a framework that we are really going to ground our instruction in, because we want to ensure that students are prepared for the future, and we truly are looking for strengths just so that we can help you realize what you're doing well already. And then we want to give you some ideas for how you can continue to grow as a practitioner.

So the next time you walk through a classroom door, whether it's a coaching visit or instructional rounds or learning walks, take a deep breath and remember what you're there for. You're there to improve teacher practice. You're there to build collective efficacy.

And ultimately, this is so teachers have the skill set they need to better meet the needs of a beautifully, wildly diverse group of learners. Thank you for pulling up a chair at the Education

Table. It has been lovely to answer this question.

If you have any other questions that you'd like me to address in a future episode, please, please, please reach out because I love answering your questions. So until next time, onwards.