

## Podcast Episode 36 Transcript

Welcome to the Education Table, where I answer your questions in about 10 minutes or less. Today's question is a super important one, especially right now. As a veteran teacher who is well versed in UDL and has seen it work for students, is it possible to make changes to curriculum delivery in a new school without being seen as out of alignment?

What small changes can be proposed without people feeling like you're giving too much help? If you're listening and nodding already, you are not alone. This tension comes up all the time, especially in schools working hard to improve consistency through high quality instructional materials, pacing guides, common assessments, and curriculum frameworks.

Teachers often enter a new setting wanting to honor the systems already in place, while also wanting to teach in ways they know support learner variability and honestly, many educators feel stuck between two the fear of being seen as off script and the fear of watching students struggle unnecessarily because instruction is too rigid. So let's unpack this carefully because I actually think there's a really important misunderstanding underneath this entire conversation. So let's start with a story.

A very good friend of mine transferred to a new district after years of successfully implementing UDL. She was thoughtful, experienced, and truly one of the best teachers I've ever seen. But within the first few weeks, she felt really nervous about making even small adjustments to instruction because the message she kept hearing was the F word: fidelity.

I remember her saying to me, Kate, if they want me to teach this like a robot, I'm out. And honestly, underneath that comment was a real fear that many educators feel when provided with high quality instructional materials or adopted curriculum. To be clear, she was not trying to replace the curriculum.

She wasn't abandoning grade level learning goals. She simply wanted to provide options for engagement, scaffold access to complex text, offer structured discussion supports, and allow flexibility in how students processed or demonstrated understanding. But she worried those moves would be interpreted as watering things down or not being aligned to the curriculum.

And this is where I think schools sometimes unintentionally create false choices between fidelity and flexibility, which in reality, strong instructional systems actually require both. So let's dive into the research base on this whole dilemma. One of the biggest misconceptions about alignment is is the idea that alignment means every teacher must deliver instruction in exactly the same way.

But true alignment is about shared goals, shared rigor, and shared outcomes, not identical delivery. Honestly, if the goal were just reading a script word for word, schools could hire basically anyone off the street to stand in front of students and read slides, or just replace teachers with robots that is not what grade teaching is. Great teaching requires professional decision-making, responsiveness, relationship building, and the ability to

recognize and respond to learner variability in real time.

The curriculum provides a destination and very important guardrails. But educators still need to make thoughtful instructional decisions about how to help students successfully get to where they're going. In fact, if we know anything from the evidence base around learning, it is that variability is the rule, not the exception.

Learners differ in how they engage, how they process information, sustain attention, regulate emotions, and express understanding. UDL exists because barriers are predictable. This means the goal of alignment should not be rigid sameness.

The goal should be ensuring all students have access to rigorous learning. This is also where it helps to distinguish between the curriculum itself and the instructional methods used to deliver it. High quality instructional materials are incredibly important.

Scope and sequences matter, and I'm a huge advocate for schools working with teachers to develop them. But within those structures, educators have to make professional decisions every day about pacing, scaffolding, grouping, discussion structures, feedback, and how they're supporting students. So how can they do this?

So let's talk about what this actually looks like in practice. When teachers are provided with high quality instructional materials and want to design more student led structures through the lens of UDL. One of the safest and most effective starting points is to focus on changes that improve access without changing any learning goals themselves.

Because as we know, UDL is about firm goals and flexible means. This distinction really matters. If the goal is analyzing theme, students may need support accessing a complex text.

If the goal is participating in academic discussions, students may benefit from sentence starters, rehearsal time, or visual supports. Supporting access is not the same as lowering expectations. Another strategy I talk about all the time is what I call explode the verbs.

Often, curriculum materials include verbs like discuss, explain, analyze, compare, or reflect. But those verbs do not require a single pathway. For example, if students are expected to discuss an idea, this could happen through a turn and talk, a structured protocol, a digital discussion board, a small group conversation, or even collaborative annotation.

The learning goal stays intact, but the pathway becomes flexible. Exploding the verbs helps teachers maintain alignment to the curriculum, while recognizing that learners may need different ways to engage with the same rigorous task. It is not lowering expectations, it's designing access to those expectations.

It's also really important to remember that many universally designed shifts are actually quite small. Sometimes teachers think UDL means redesigning everything overnight, but often the highest leverage changes are pretty simple and very strategic. For example, you can provide choices in how students brainstorm.

If students have to brainstorm. You could give them options to have a conversation or explore exemplars or do some research online or to have a conversation. You could also provide options for how students comprehend complex text by preteaching vocabulary, providing visuals and giving students the options to read alone or collaboratively so they can get support with decoding and oral fluency.

None of those moves abandon alignment. They just strengthen access to the curriculum already being taught and provide options for students to build learner agency. I also think it's incredibly important for schools and districts to develop clear do's and don'ts.

These are guidance documents when implementing curriculum. Recently I was working with a district who just adopted a new ELA curriculum and I was supporting them with UDL. And before I modeled a lesson I asked for clarity around what flexibility was encouraged and what would be considered out of alignment.

The document had three columns: do's, don'ts, and UDL Enhancements and this document was amazing for me in my planning. One of the dos, for example, was always providing students with access to the grade level text. The corresponding don't was do not replace the text with a lower level supplemental text or a leveled text.

And then the UDL enhancements encourage teachers to use visuals to activate background knowledge, provide options to read or listen to the text, incorporate options for collaborative discussion, and to provide multiple ways for students to process their ideas and make their thinking visible before having to respond to that text. In other words, the expectation was not teach this like a robot. The expectation was to maintain the integrity of the learning goal and the complex text while reducing unnecessary barriers to access and building opportunities for student agency.

That clarity was incredibly helpful for me because I did not want to go rogue, but also because it protected rigor while creating space for universally designed supports. Honestly, that kind of clarity helps everyone. It reduces fear, it protects consistency, and it gives teachers permission to use their brilliance and professional judgment with agreed upon guardrails.

So when it comes to finding the balance between UDL and high quality instructional materials, alignment should never mean abandoning professional judgment or ignoring learner variability. Strong instructional systems need coherence, but they also need responsiveness. The reality is that many universally designed practices are not radical changes.

They're thoughtful refinements that increase access, engagement, and participation while maintaining firm goals and high expectations. So if you're entering a new setting or wondering whether there's room to implement UDL practices with high quality instructional materials, I would encourage you to start small, to stay grounded in student outcomes, and remember this: flexibility in how students access learning is not misalignment. Often, it's what allows alignment to actually work for more learners.

As always, thank you so much for listening to the Education Table. Until next time, onward.