

Podcast Episode 28: Measuring What Matters – Transcript

Hello everyone!

Welcome back to the Education Table, where we unpack your biggest questions about inclusive and innovative teaching in 10 minutes or less. I am Katie Novak, and today we're diving into a question that almost every educator asks themselves when they start shifting to more universally designed practices. And that is, "how do I know if this is actually working?" So let's break this down with a story, some stats and research, and then some concrete strategies. So let's dive in.

So recently, I was coaching an amazing team who was making these huge gains in being more flexible through the lens of UDL. They were providing students with choices. They were asking them to reflect on those choices. And then they came forward with a question that, again, I think is so worthwhile, which is, I mean, it feels like students are more engaged.

I feel like I'm providing more choices. But how do we know if this is actually working? Because ultimately, we need a clear sign that by eliminating barriers and providing more options and choices, we're actually increasing the outcomes for students. And I remember feeling the same exact way when I was in the classroom.

So let's dive into the research on growth and improvement. UDL is never going to be about perfection or doing it right on day one. It really is about shifting practices over time. And in a recent study that was titled Impact of UDL on Student Engagement and Achievement in Inclusive Education, researchers found that classrooms implementing UDL with integrity saw measurable gains, statistically significant measurable gains in engagement, in self regulation, and in academic performance, especially among students who had struggled most previously.

But here is the catch. The gains did not show up immediately. They appeared after several months of consistent implementation. Because what we're really measuring is the pattern of the growth.

There is not a single strategy that's going to transform education overnight. This is about progress. So what are some strategies that we can leverage to ensure that our UDL work is heading on the positive track? So how on earth do you know that UDL is working in practice?

And how do you measure it? The clearest evidence is going to come from shifts that you can see or hear or actually measure with students over time. So I want to share three indicators

that are worthwhile measuring. The first is student engagement.

One of the first or earliest signs that UDL is starting to take hold is an uptick in student engagement. So you might notice more learners leaning into activities instead of resisting them. You might realize that discussions are becoming more focused or, livelier. Maybe you're noticing more students are contributing.

So remember, though, that engagement is not just about enjoyment and participation. It's also about persistence. So you want to notice, are students sticking with tasks longer? Are they able to bounce back from frustration and choose another path, you know, faster than they were before?

These are the moments that help us to know that engagement is shifting. And so how can we measure this? First, you might want to consider a quick self assessment where you ask students to rate their engagement by completing a quick survey like how motivated were you in this unit? Or what in this unit really helped you to stay focused?

And you absolutely don't need to give these daily, but if you come up with some questions and over time, let's say once a month, we use this as an exit ticket. Hopefully you'll see that students are reporting that they are more motivated or more challenged or find, you know, that they're more focused over time. Now, the next thing we're going to look for after student engagement is learner variability. How is learner variability becoming more visible?

When UDL is starting to take hold, you should see students starting to take different pathways toward the same goal. So a class is going to support multiple tasks and formats at the same time. In one corner, you might see a student sketching out ideas. Another across the room might be dictating into a tablet.

Another might be using a graphic organizer. At first glance, it just might look a little bit like chaos. But if everyone is anchored in the same learning goal in the same rigorous task, having multiple tasks and formats is evidence of purposeful flexibility. And when students are able to sustain their attention because they have what they need, you can start pulling more small targeted groups for feedback.

Because ultimately the best work we can do is when we're able to pull a student or small group of students and provide them with that really, really specific feedback, the dollops of feedback about what they need, but we cannot do that if the entire class is dependent on us to keep instruction moving. So if we can provide students with what they need so that they can work more independently, that frees us up to be able to circulate, to pull small groups,

and to provide feedback. Over time we want this variability to become really routine so students know what tools help them learn best. They actually choose responsibly.

They're not always going to be having to wait for the teacher for directions or next step because they're able to self select the strategies that will allow them to keep going. So how can you measure these shifts in student agency? First, you might want to capture photos or videos or or notes to show students using different materials and strategies. This is also great to share in a newsletter or as evidence or artifact for your ED eval portfolio.

Another early indicator that you can look to measure is student voice. So in some ways, the strongest indicator of UDL's really early impact is when students begin to articulate their learning process. So again, when we ask them, what are you choosing? Why are you choosing it?

We want to hear them to say, well, I figured out that this is the best way for me to study because. Or I like to share my learning this way because it's really aligned to this passion I have. Or when I do it this way, even though it takes me a little bit longer, I know that ultimately the work is going to be stronger. And so those are not casual remarks.

Capture that magic, because when you hear students saying things like this, it signals that they are really, really building agency, which is going to in turn make your teaching life more manageable because it's showing that students are capable of more informed choices. Student voice also shows up when learners advocate for themselves, and they might start asking for a tool or a strategy or a format that helps them to engage or learn more deeply. And this advocacy is a direct reflection that UDL is taking root, even though you may not see the shifts in academic outcomes yet. So if you're going to measure the impact of student voice, you might want to gather student reflections monthly or at the end of the quarter and just say, what did you learn about yourself as a learner this month?

What do you need to do to do your most challenging work? And give them options. Do they want to post this reflection in a written piece? Do they want to maybe do it digitally or potentially create, like, an oral or a video reflection and look for qualitative growth over time and how specific their strategies are and how confident they are or and how directed they are in terms of, like, I know this about me, and ultimately I know that I have to, because we want to shift this more to student led.

The most important thing that I can share with you that's been so wonderful for me as an educator is to keep a feedback that matters folder where you save the most powerful quotes or reflections or work samples that really capture student voice, because you'll want to keep

that folder for years. I love when kids are like, you know what? I never thought that I was going to be a really great writer until I took your class. And when I learned that I could do it this way and that these strategies work for me, and that is magic.

And when you're having, like, your existential crisis about goodness gracious what am I doing in education? You can take that baby out and it's a great reminder of how powerful this work is. Thank you again for joining me at the Education Table. I am so thrilled that you hung around to learn more about how you can begin to measure some of the early impact of UDL as it starts to shift classroom practice, and maybe before it starts really shifting those academic outcomes.

Because goodness knows, we have to measure what matters. So if you have a folder feedback that matters, or you have figured out that UDL has shifted something amazingly in your learning environment, please let me know. I'm very easy to find online tag at [katienovakudl](#) and until next time, onward.