

Podcast Episode 30: UDL Isn't Just for Classrooms — It's for Small Groups, 1:1 Moments, and Everyday Life – Transcript

Welcome back to the Education Table, the podcast where we talk about what inclusive, innovative teaching actually looks like in practice. I'm Katie Novak, and today we're zooming in to talk about how UDL applies to small groups and one on one work. Because UDL is not just for classroom teachers and whole group lessons. It is a mindset, a framework for anyone supporting learning, growth or behavioral change.

And that includes service providers who work with students one on one or in small groups. So let's dive into a story, some stats and research, and then strategies that can be used even when working with a single student. Let me tell you about a good friend of mine who's a school counselor. Every time I see him, I ask about the strategies he uses with students when they come to him dysregulated and ready to unload.

Because honestly, he is so good at what he does and I need his brain. And you know what he always says? Options. Every single session, he offers choices to his learners.

So he'll say things like, would you rather start with a breathing exercise or do you want to take a couple of minutes to write down the things you want to talk to me about today? Or maybe would you rather stay, in here or go for a walk while we talk? Now, why does he do this when he's with one single person? It's because he absolutely knows that what works one day for someone may not work work the next.

And one of the things I say all the time is like, what we're capable of on our best day is very, very different than what we're capable of when we're having a really bad day. And so because we show up differently based on stress and energy and mood and context, we absolutely need to make sure that we're embracing variability and providing firm goals, flexible means even when we're working with a single person. In science, this is called intrapersonal variability. So let's get into the research.

UDL is often framed around designing inclusive learning environments, which makes people think of really inclusive classrooms full of students. But that's not the only place where we can leverage UDL because it's just as powerful when you're sitting next to one student during a Tier 2 reading intervention, or meeting as a counselor or working with small groups during math centers. The principle is the exact same. The key is recognizing that even the same learner brings different needs, barriers, and motivations to the table depending on the context.

That is called intrapersonal variability. As an example, a lot of us have a preferred morning drink. For me, right now, it happens to be hot coffee with turmeric and my favorite sweet creamer. But I am absolutely not in the mood for it every single day.

Sometimes it's way too hot to drink coffee or I took a red eye and I need a nap and so coffee is like a big no, no. And I only drink 2 cups of caffeinated coffee a day. So, if for some reason I'm at a conference and I drink two cups of hotel coffee and then I come home, like I don't want my coffee, like I'm just gonna have tea. So even though I'm the same exact person, I will choose differently based on context.

And we want to offer the same flexibility to our learners because we know based on cognitive neuroscience that intrapersonal variability is the rule. It is not the exception. We are not only unique, but we are dynamic. And when we assume consistency, we ignore the real human experience of learning.

So what are some concrete strategies that we can use right away?

Now, the first strategy is simple. Start with the goal, always. Start by asking yourself, what is the purpose of this session? If you're a speech and language pathologist, it might be something like students are going to use complete sentences to describe a visual.

If you're a counselor, maybe it's the student needs to identify and name a current feeling as well as a helpful coping strategy. Keep that goal in mind as all flexibility has to align to the firm goal. So in the example above with the school counselor, you might start and say, I want you to prepare yourself for the session today. Would you rather take a moment and complete a quick write, or do you want to start with a mindfulness exercise and then you go on to because today we're going to be talking about how you're currently feeling and start talking about some helpful coping strategies.

So what is the best way for you to get ready? Now, the same learner can choose something different almost to every day. It's just the goal is super clear. Now, first firm goal.

Second is all of the choices target the same goal. So when designing any support experience, the magic really is when students are given choices that move toward the same objective. So take the speech language pathologist goal. Use complete sentences to describe a visual.

Now, the firm goal is fixed, but the pathway can be varied. So one student might want to describe the image aloud. Another might need a recording. They might feel more

comfortable recording a response on an iPad, for example.

Now, each of these options honors different ways that students can express information in speech, but it's anchored in the same skill, which is producing a complete sentence using speech, right? Maybe they can even choose, like, what they're going to be sharing a sentence about. Maybe they can choose a visual or they can tell a story. But ultimately it's about firm goals, flexible means.

The same principle holds true in counseling. Imagine a goal like identify and name a current feeling. One student might want to sketch how they feel. Another might choose emojis.

Some might prefer to role play. And another might want to write a journal entry. So the options not only make the session feel more approachable, but they acknowledge that students needs and comfort levels shift from day to day. The most important thing is the choice does not mean that there is not structure in the session.

On the contrary, it means the structure is clear and really intentionally designed around a firm goal. The flexibility is always in the scaffold and not in the purpose. Now the third strategy is to preload the tools and model the strategies. Choice without preparation can quickly become really unproductive.

So it's not enough to hand a student an iPad and be like, oh, if you want to record yourself, record yourself. If they've never used an app, or they don't know how to plan what to say, or if they're not sure what success looks like, this would just be really frustrating, probably for everyone. So this is where UDL really starts to break down in practice, because they need more than options. They need skills and the confidence to use all the options.

And that's why it's so important to preload the tools and model the strategies. So if you want students to select for multiple approaches, they need to experience each option for first with your guidance, when they're in a really good place for learning. And so this could mean modeling how to record a response or practicing how to organize ideas if you're using scrap paper or maybe sharing what a strong journal entry might look like. Maybe as a specialist, you dedicate the first couple of weeks as you're working with students to, you know, explore every option at the beginning of a session before they have freedom to choose.

Because then they're not guessing what works best. They're selecting from tools they already know how to use, which will build fluency and independence. Now, the last strategy is to make sure that you're building time, even just a couple of moments for reflection. So the end of every session is just as valuable as the beginning of every session.

Even 30 seconds can provide a lot of insight for both you and the learner. So a question like, what part of today really helped you learn? Or what felt challenging today and why? You know, because you want to encourage students to make connections between the strategies they chose and their learning process.

Over time, these moments will help students identify which approaches really do work best for them and under what conditions. You might also ask students to consider their next step by asking something like next time, do you think you want to use the same strategy or do you want to try something different? And this simple question shifts the ownership of learning to the student while signaling that change in experimentation are not only acceptable, but really encouraged. So for service providers, these practices can transform sessions from isolated learning experiences into a continuous cycle of growth as a learner, not just in the area that you're targeting.

At its heart, UDL isn't about creating endless options. It's about holding firm to a clear purpose while building flexibility around it that acknowledges who's in front of us and how they show up differently every day. And this is why this framework is not limited to classroom teachers. It's just as powerful for reading specialists, occupational therapists, paraeducators, counselors, tutors, anyone who works with students in small groups or in one on one settings.

Humans are variable and really great design embraces that variability. So thank you for pulling up a chair at the Education Table. If you're already weaving UDL into your sessions, I would love to hear about it. Share your best strategies with me and maybe I highlight your idea in a future episode because I love examples from the field.

Until then, everyone keep designing with purpose, keep honoring flexibility, and keep creating these spaces where every single learner can reach their full potential. Until next time. Onward.