

A **UDL** NOW! book



# PLAYBOOK

for School and District Leaders

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# Introduction

Longtime college and university professor Reed Markham once said, “Successful leaders see the opportunities in every difficulty rather than the difficulty in every opportunity.” It has always been true that as leaders, we have a choice of how we lead, inspire, communicate, and manage. This power and privilege doesn’t go away in times of monumental upheaval. In many ways, global events of the past few years—the COVID-19 pandemic, conversations about racial justice, and widespread economic insecurity—have created opportunities to deconstruct our systems and build ones that are more inclusive, diverse, and equitable.

Traditional teaching just doesn’t hold up when traditional structures are no longer in place. Thank goodness for that. We have an amazing opportunity at this juncture to unlearn some of the aspects of education that have been holding our learners, educators, families, and community members back for too long.

During the pandemic, educators and administrators who had committed to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in earnest struggled far less with switching over to remote, hybrid, and concurrent learning landscapes. Why? They had flexibility in their repertoire. They did not rely on one tried-and-true method of delivery of content or assessment. Instead, they recognized barriers for what they were and considered how to pivot, ebb, flow, and change. Their commitment to iterative design helped them to adapt.

As administrators and leaders, we are faced with a mountain of difficulties, many of which have nothing to do with educating our students. We all know that hell hath no fury like a broken-down bus or a water leak in the boys' bathroom, and how those problems can derail our improvement efforts.

Still, this opportunity to rethink traditional education should not, and cannot, be ignored. Now, more than ever, educators all over the world need to fully commit to implementing UDL principles in their learning environments. As leaders in education, we have the power and the privilege to create a vision and strategy for this work.

Our current system, sadly, does exactly what it was designed to do—foster and exacerbate privilege. Although we have made great strides in the past few decades with increasing inclusion rates, implementing UDL and innovative practices in pockets, and adopting whole-school initiatives like restorative justice, we are *still* not meeting the needs of many of our students.

But that doesn't mean we can't.

Kurt Lewin theorized a model of change that is known as the *unfreeze-change-refreeze model* that requires prior learning to be rejected and replaced. Lewin asserted that human change is a process that involves painful unlearning without loss of identity and difficult relearning as one attempts to restructure thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and attitudes (Lewin, 1947).

Let's unpack that. Change is painful. It requires us to let go of beliefs we once had and start over. To make things even more complex, the process of change may attack our identity and make us question everything we thought we knew about ourselves as educators.

We love this concept of *painful unlearning* and its relationship to engagement. If we are to change, we have to unlearn the practices that have become second nature, even the ones we believe are working for most educators or for most kids. To do this, we have to admit to ourselves and others that something is wrong

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or imperfect, and when we do that, our ego takes a hit. As Edgar Henry Schein (1999), a former professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management, says, “Failing to meet our creative potential often looks more desirable than risking failure and loss of self-esteem in the learning process” (p. 60). But unfreezing involves just that. We have to recognize that our former belief systems are problematic, and we have to let go of them and replace them with a new model (the *refreeze*).

The book *Unlearning: Changing Your Beliefs and Classroom with UDL* (Posey & Novak, 2020) discussed the process of unlearning through the UDL lens. To motivate, engage, and empower learners, educators must not only learn about UDL but must first unlearn practices that don’t work for all students. We, as school and district leaders, have to do the same. Even though it’s painful.

We have all been there before, right? We are about to begin something that is going to change our lives for the better. We know if we start exercising today, and continue every day, we will be healthier and feel better in a couple of months. We know that if we break down and call a family member who we have been fighting with, we will be able to move past our anger and resentment and make upcoming gatherings more enjoyable. We know that if we want to make schools better for our students, we cannot keep doing the same things and hoping for the best. In many cases, we know these things intuitively but still find reasons to hold off. We put up counterforces, and then we stay exactly where we are.

Tackling a change as significant and large as changing the way education has been done for centuries is monumental in its scope. We have seen the next big thing come and go. This isn’t just the next big thing. This is something different. UDL is a framework focused on designing better classrooms, better schools, and better districts. This framework is a reminder that variability exists and is a beautiful aspect of diversity, and it needs to be designed for.

Both of us love Paulo Coelho’s (1998) book *The Alchemist*, especially as it relates to change in our lives. The story follows the tale

of a shepherd boy, Santiago, as he leaves his home in search of the world's greatest treasure. In his travels, he meets the Alchemist, who shares wisdom that allows Santiago, and any reader, to find more purpose. Essentially, the book helps us to recognize that to find success, we have to follow what we know to be true in our hearts, even if there are barriers and obstacles along the way. The beauty of the journey, regardless of how challenging it may be, is that there are lessons to be learned with every misstep, every obstacle, and every struggle. May the same be true for your UDL journey.

We would not write this book if we were not 100% confident that building your leadership practice through the lens of UDL will make your schools better for your students, their families, and staff. Even if you are only able to implement some aspects of the framework at this time, it will still be beneficial.

So, to begin this book, we want to share a quote from *The Alchemist*, one to remind you about the importance of your journey and how what you wish for your school and district is the very thing that makes our work worth all the challenges that come our way: "It's the possibility of having a dream come true that makes life interesting."

# Don't stop now!

Now, more than ever, educators all over the world need to fully commit to implementing UDL principles in their learning environments. As leaders in education, we have the power and the privilege to create a vision and strategy for this work.

Continue Your Journey.

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