

# It's Time to Re-define What It Means to be Successful with UDL Implementation

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## **INTRODUCTION**

One goal of UDL is to expand access to educational opportunities and to increase success in meeting educational outcomes by identifying and eliminating barriers that exist in current educational practices (Hackman & Rauscher, 2004). This goal resonates deeply with teachers who understand that making learning relevant for students increases engagement and engagement is tied to student success (Edyburn, 2010). This was true in a rural elementary school in Minnesota, where the principal established a UDL initiative and invited the presenters to facilitate a series of professional development activities and provide support to teachers during a year of implementation. After a year of implementation, we began analyzing data from recorded coaching sessions and identified the most prominent challenges as well as patterns of growth and accomplishments. In this session, we discuss and normalize the challenges that teachers commonly experienced during the first year of UDL implementation and share practices that supported teacher development to redefine success in UDL implementation.

## **NORMALIZING CHALLENGES**

When the implementation project began, many teachers were already incorporating choice into their activities to increase student engagement and support independence and executive functioning. However, as teachers began their implementation projects they experienced several challenges. For example, teachers were initially uncertain about how to expand UDL practices in their planning, instruction, and assessment. Teachers questioned whether they were “doing it right” despite the coaching they received. This uncertainty affected teachers’ engagement in UDL implementation and slowed their progress in expanding their practices. In an effort to build their repertoire and their confidence, the teachers sought role models of effective UDL implementation and wanted to learn from each other. However, none felt they were expert enough to provide that role modeling and so plans to observe one another did not come to fruition. Live observations are also complicated by the need to have coverage in a classroom.

Teachers also experienced challenges related to

implementing UDL while adhering to the district-approved curriculum, administering district-approved assessments, adhering to state-mandated requirements, and working alongside colleagues who do not understand or do not value UDL. The prescribed nature of the curricula limited teachers’ creativity in developing and incorporating multiple means of representation, action and expression and engagement into their lessons and assessments.

## **TIME CONSTRAINTS AND INITIATIVE FATIGUE**

Throughout the year it became clear that, like all initiatives, the UDL initiative in this elementary school required a substantial investment in time, even though resource teachers had little to spare (Ahlgren, Gillander Gadin 2011). The UDL initiative was put on hold several times during the year due to district-wide strategic planning meetings, priority building-wide projects, and multiple scheduling conflicts. Pauses in planned observations and coaching meetings slowed, and sometimes halted, momentum.

Although the principal and the teachers saw the value of the initiative, they were not seeing a return on their investment of time and energy commensurate with their expectations. Moreover, the persistent lack of time, lack of systemic support, and initiative fatigue simultaneously drained their energy and dampened the excitement of UDL as an educational innovation.

## **MODELS AND MOTIVATION**

Despite the challenges, teachers did make progress in their understanding and implementation of UDL. By the end of the year, all the teachers experienced successes through trial and error, creativity, and persistence. Teachers reflected on how they developed tools, such as choice boards, to facilitate students’ engagement and independence. They also learned from their initial attempts to structure choices to meet students’ needs, they learned about how often they needed to change activities, and they learned about what additional supports students needed to be successful. For example, teachers created video instructions for students to use when they had questions about an activity. Likewise, teachers observed that students lost interest in certain

activities after some time and learned to modify options more regularly.

Although teachers were receptive to observing one another implementing UDL in their lessons, the logistical challenges of doing so prevented the idea from becoming reality. The lack of role modeling, and similarly the lack of collaboration across grade levels, inhibited teacher engagement and motivation. Although established as a professional development cohort, the teachers worked primarily in grade-level teams and so were limited in their cross-grade interactions. Despite these challenges, teachers were consistently encouraged and motivated by student engagement. Some teachers began to hold individual brief conferences with students to discuss their choices and work products. These conversations illuminated student development and engagement and showed teachers that although it can be difficult to see in a large group, students are engaged and are learning.

### **REDEFINING SUCCESS**

Redefining what it means to be successful in a UDL implementation initiative, such as the one discussed in this session, requires managing expectations, operating with a growth mindset, and acknowledging the long-term nature of systemic change. Teachers, principals, and implementation researchers must set achievable goals that work with building and district initiatives and recognize that change comes over the course of months and years.

Success should be defined as ongoing engagement in UDL principles and practices and continuous effort to incorporate UDL into planning, instruction, and assessment. There is no finish line with UDL implementation, which can be a challenge for those who want confirmation of completion. Setting individual and achievable goals with teachers encourages them to identify their own markers of success and to work toward their goals despite known challenges.

### **REFERENCES**

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