

Making the Transition from Planning to Implementation: Essential Logistics

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Abstract

It is easy to get stuck in the exploratory and planning phase of UDL. Whether you are implementing UDL as a district-wide mandate, or growing UDL from the ground up one school at a time, making the shift to real-world UDL implementation requires attention to logistics. This paper discusses the variables affecting the early phases of UDL implementation. It then describes the preparation phase in one school district where UDL was implemented school by school. It covers the selection of schools and school-based leaders, as well as the role of UDL consultants and principals. Additionally, a timeline of preparation tasks is outlined.

INTRODUCTION

“The very essence of leadership is [that] you have to have a vision. You cannot blow an uncertain trumpet.” This quote by Theodore Hesburgh (www.leadershipnow.com) aptly captures the challenge underscoring implementation efforts. Implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is not a simplistic endeavor; it cannot be reduced to a rubric or a list of tasks. Implementation efforts require strong leadership with a clear roadmap to move UDL forward. CAST’s National Center On Universal Design For Learning (2012) has described five phases of UDL Implementation. Adapted from Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, and Wallace (2005), the CAST phases of implementation are labeled as follows: (1) Explore, (2) Prepare, (3) Integrate, (4) Scale, and (5) Optimize. CAST states that these “are not rigid stages but instead are fluid and recursive in nature” (CAST, 2012). This paper will focus on the exploration and preparation phases of UDL implementation in a large suburban school district— those stages that lead to the integration phase of implementation.

INITIAL PHASES OF UDL IMPLEMENTATION

Exploration

While implementation may look different from district to district, the exploration phase is generally marked by an awareness that the UDL Framework offers a well-defined perspective on diversity and the education of all students. The exploration phase can take months or years. It is the time when new ideas are contemplated and new educational pedagogies are envisioned. In Montgomery County Public

Schools (MCPS), a large school district in Maryland, northwest of Washington, D.C., the principles of UDL were first infused into voluntary professional development. The foundations of UDL were in concert with other pedagogical beliefs at that time, such as differentiated instruction, co-teaching and the need to engage all students, especially underperforming students. Subsequently, UDL principles were incorporated system-wide into mandatory school team trainings across all grades. In this exploratory phase, sharing knowledge about UDL occurred across many levels of the organization.

Preparation

Shifting to the preparation phase entails a great deal of discussion on who, what, where, why and how. A clear consensus on what UDL is and is not, as well as why UDL is important, is central to any discussion in the preparation phase. Structured plans for implementation are deliberated, and target schools are discussed. It is easy to get stuck in either the exploration or preparation phases. In the absence of identifiable leadership, UDL principles can be mere talking points that are not incorporated into a well-defined implementation plan. Without a clear plan that clarifies pedagogical beliefs and implementation logistics, UDL is a framework that may be included in professional development, but may not systematically progress to the next integration phase. It is not uncommon to hear educators who have long been providing professional development and resources on UDL to ask, “How do we get UDL implementation going; what’s the process?”

UDL IMPLEMENTATION VARIABLES

There are three variables to acknowledge when considering UDL implementation efforts. The first is the source of support for the initiative. Who is providing the impetus for this new initiative? Where is the locus of control in a new UDL endeavor? It might have been initiated at the highest levels of administration, or it might have originated with a department or team of forward-thinking individuals (Figure 1). Regardless of the starting point, the source of support is an important factor— it sets the stage for implementation efforts. Will the implementation effort grow gradually from the ground up, or will there be a clear top-down mandate?

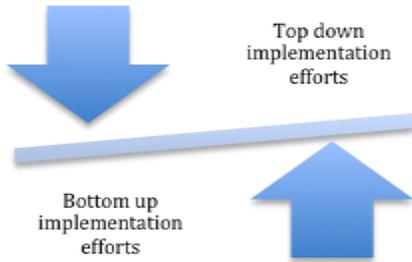


Figure 1. Source(s) of support for UDL implementation efforts.

The second variable to consider is where implementation efforts will concentrate. Will implementation efforts focus on all staff in all schools within a district, all staff in some schools, or some staff in some schools (Figure 2). If there is sufficient support and funding, and the full backing of the school superintendent, then district-wide implementation may be possible. But this is a big endeavor that requires well-orchestrated professional learning opportunities, as well as resources and tools. It requires collaboration across all departments and a curriculum rooted in UDL. Moreover, when you are engaged in large-scale implementation, you need to “contract out” more of what needs to be done to build UDL. Consequently, the fidelity of UDL depends more on the skills of the on-site school facilitators who require ongoing mentoring. Ultimately, all of these elements are crucial to achieving full scale UDL implementation. If this is not realistic in the short term, then circumstances may dictate a more modest, but systematic, approach to implementation at individual school levels.

Principals, as critical stakeholders, are key to successful implementation. Principal commitment is a must for effective school implementation. Staff buy-in also is critical at the school level. However, capturing the full engagement and commitment of every staff member is not always possible during the initial year of UDL integration. The development of a professional learning community or a team of on-site leaders to spearhead implementation efforts may provide a sound way to ramp up to full school UDL implementation. Regardless of whether implementation efforts concentrate on all staff in all schools, or all staff in some schools, or some staff in some schools, implementation research indicates that it takes three to five years to get to full implementations in any setting (Fixsen, et al., 2005). In the first year of even well planned, school-based UDL endeavors, it takes time to experiment with what works and what doesn't and to assess emerging patterns of best practices. Over time, there is increased confidence in UDL, and an increased effort to document and showcase effectiveness, and build capacity across the school.

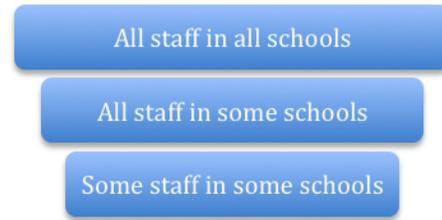


Figure 2. Concentration of UDL implementation efforts.

The third variable is the level of implementation (Figure 3). Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, and Wallace (2005) state that there are three ways to categorize implementation.

- *Paper implementation* - Where change is put only into policies and procedures.
- *Process implementation* - Where effort is spent on training events, supervision and reporting.
- *Performance implementation* - Where change components are fully integrated with fidelity and measureable outcomes.

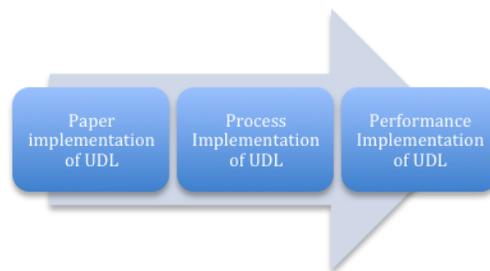


Figure 3. Levels of UDL implementation efforts.

There is no one method of implementation. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Timing (e.g., competing initiatives) and funding (e.g. district funding, grant funding) will have a major impact on implementation efforts. These three variables are in essence the “who,” “where,” and “how” of UDL implementation. Having a clear view of these variables makes it easier to proceed systematically.

UDL Implementation Variables Applied to a Large Suburban School District

In MCPS, the High Incidence Accessible Technology Team (HIAT) introduced UDL as part of voluntary professional learning opportunities, including one-credit introductory courses on UDL. UDL provided an important framework in which to anchor best practices in the use of educational and assistive technology. During the exploration phase in MCPS, the language of UDL was included in district-wide mandatory professional development that was rolled out

over the course of a few years to school teams at every grade level. Although this training emanated from the Division of Special Education, staff development professionals designing the training modules ensured that the messaging of UDL principles applied to general as well as special educators. UDL entered the “preparation phase” when it became time to identify schools that would commit to UDL integration.

Using the three variables discussed previously in this paper, the bottom-up commitment to UDL started with a small team, but over time was incorporated into district-wide professional development. UDL was not a specifically identified district-wide mandate, however. Nonetheless, an integrated approach to elementary curriculum was under development and the curriculum design team committed to ensuring the incorporation of UDL principles into the new curriculum. As of the 2014-2015 school year, Maryland State Department of Education regulations require the incorporation of UDL principles and guidelines into the development and provision of curriculum, instructional materials, instruction, professional development, and student assessment (COMAR, 2012). State-level directives have set a path for top-down, district-wide UDL implementation across all public school systems in Maryland.

In MCPS, initial UDL implementation efforts concentrated on targeted schools, starting with two schools and scaling up to 24 schools over the course of five years. The concentration of effort focused on some staff in some schools by developing small professional learning communities (PLCs) using teachers as part of “UDL Leadership Teams” to grow UDL from within each school.

Initially, “paper” implementation consisted of instructional procedures and strategies for teaching and learning using UDL principles and guidelines that were incorporated into professional development workshops. In 2009, UDL implementation was initiated in one elementary and one middle school. The level of implementation shifted from “paper implementation” to “process implementation” to include staff training, classroom supervision and reporting to the school principals. At that time, while there were ample resources on what constitutes UDL, there was little available to guide the implementation of UDL. Over time, classroom observation tools and survey instruments were developed to measure the fidelity of UDL practices and, thus, the shift to “performance” implementation.

KEY ELEMENTS IN THE PREPARATION PHASE

The remainder of this paper focuses on key elements in the preparation phase of UDL implementation in MCPS. As stated previously, UDL implementation concentrated on some staff in some schools, starting with two schools in year one and, with the help of state grant funding, increasing to more than 20 schools in a period of 5 years.

The Role of UDL Consultants

As a first step, it was critical to identify staff persons who were well versed in UDL to coordinate integration efforts. In the beginning, full time HIAT staff served as part time UDL consultants, sharing ideas and strategies, and delivering professional development to one elementary and one middle school. HIAT staff spent a minimum of one day per week at each school and met bimonthly with the UDL Leadership Teams established at each school. As the number of schools engaged in UDL implementation increased, the role of the UDL consultants became more apparent. One full time UDL consultant for every six schools implementing UDL was considered optimal.

The role of UDL Consultants:

- Coordinate efforts with central administration
- Assist in the selection of schools
- Meet with principals to clarify expectations
- Provide basic information on UDL to schools
- Provide training and coaching to school-based UDL facilitators
- Provide training on what it means to be part of a developing PLC
- Provide training on UDL principles and guidelines to UDL Leadership Teams
- Support the ongoing development of the PLCs
- Provide on-site support and conduct UDL “walk throughs”
- Track data, examine trends, troubleshoot, problem-solve, and unravel misconceptions about UDL

Selecting Participating Schools

Participating schools were selected using an online application process. Memoranda were sent from an administrator at the central office level to principals, briefly describing the opportunity and inviting them to apply. Links to the online application and to video testimonials from principals who had participated in previous years were provided. A document file was attached describing the UDL Implementation project in more detail. This file described goals and expectations. Benefits and deliverables, timelines, administrative commitment, the purpose of the PLC, the staff selection process and staff expectations were clearly explained. Face-to-face information sessions were also scheduled to provide information and answer questions about the UDL projects. This approach was adopted based on the recognition that it

is essential for principals to have a clear understanding up front of what is needed to develop an effective PLC. For example, educators need time in the master schedule to plan collaboratively with UDL in mind, and both principals and staff need to understand the importance of measuring fidelity of implementation.

The online application (see Appendix) serves multiple purposes. It reinforces the level of commitment required. It provides information on the technology tools available in classrooms. The application also allows the evaluators who will select participating schools to gauge whether the UDL implementation project will complement or compete with other priority initiatives.

At the end of the application period, central office administrators met with UDL consultants to select participating schools. Once participating schools were selected, it was time to meet directly with the principal of each school. Informal discussions clarified the scope and sequence of the project, and shared examples of the effectiveness of UDL in neighboring schools. It was important to clarify that in the first half of the school year, members of the UDL Leadership team would focus on implementing UDL in their classrooms with increasing fidelity. Outreach to staff in the school as a whole commenced in the second half of the school year.

It is often useful to take stock of what software and hardware is available at each school and determine whether technology upgrades are upcoming. One concern is that the more technology you have to put in place, the greater the need for training on tools, which cuts into professional learning allocated to the application of UDL principles. UDL implementation involves leveraging the tools you have on hand, advocating for a better distribution of what is available, and spending funds on that which will be most useful.

Selecting The School-Based Leadership Team

Staff members that participated in the school-based UDL Leadership team were also selected by application. Full school meetings were used to introduce the UDL projects, to answer questions, and to encourage staff to apply. Thereafter, an email was sent to staff with a link to an online application. A document was attached that described the project in full detail. This document described the benefits of participation, explicit goals and expectations, and provided information about a required three-credit, year long, 15-session asynchronous online course. Learning management system software was used to provide ongoing information relative to UDL, to provide opportunities to

reflect and share ideas related to UDL, and to develop a professional network for PLC members across participating schools within the district. It was important for staff to understand that this online environment is much more than a “course.” It is more than a series of lessons. It is a forum for building a PLC where staff can reflect on educational practices by sharing stories that inform practice. It is a vehicle for gaining confidence in order to explore new ways of teaching, and to collaboratively build an understanding of what UDL looks like in the classroom.

It is essential for staff participation to be truly voluntary. They should not be “volun-told” to participate. School administrators and the UDL consultant reviewed staff applications collaboratively. Typically, eight to twelve staff persons from any discipline were selected from no more than eight classrooms per school. For example, general education teachers, special educators, media specialists, and paraprofessionals were encouraged to apply. PLCs profit from staff members that are motivated to try new teaching methods and materials, and want to learn more about UDL and technology integration. Staff should not have competing afterschool commitments on preset UD Leadership meeting days. PLC members should be skillful teachers open to new learning, willing to share strategies and resources, and be able to effectively coach others. An on-site facilitator with organizational skills, leadership abilities, and a flexible schedule should be designated at each school by the school principal.

Once the UDL Leadership Team was selected, it was useful for the UDL consultant to meet with the on-site facilitator and the team as a whole to outline goals and expectations and answer questions that arose. Prior to the start of the new school year, it is advantageous to provide some professional development on the foundations of UDL and provide staff with introductory reading material.

Preparation Timeline

The following is a timeline of events that help schools get ready to begin the UDL integration phase at the onset of the school year.

January/ February:

- Initiate the school application process
- Meet with principals
- Meet with central administration to select participating schools

March/April:

- Present information about UDL to each participating school
- Initiate the staff application process

- Meet with principals to select members of the UDL Leadership Team for each school

May/June:

- Meet with the on-site UDL facilitator and the UDL Leadership Team to provide information and expectations for the year to come

July/August

- Provide professional learning opportunities on the foundations of UDL

September to April

- All first year UDL Leadership Teams participate in a three credit, online forum that serves to foster the development of a UDL professional learning community

CONCLUSION

This paper focuses on the preparation phase of UDL implementation by describing processes that ensure readiness for the start of the integration phase. It describes the preparation activities of a large suburban school district where UDL is being implemented with fidelity across multiple schools. Whether you are bringing UDL to scale to all staff in all schools or some staff in some schools, reaching full scale UDL integration has its challenges. But one way to minimize this at the outset is to have a clear and systematic preparation process.

There are advantages to building UDL from within a school culture. It marshals the energies and enthusiasm of teacher leaders, enabling them to spread the message from one peer to another. Fixsen, et al. (2005) suggest that school-wide implementation efforts are not as productive as building slowly and systematically with efforts jumpstarted by school leaders. However, bringing UDL to scale four or five schools at time is not efficient. In a large district like MCPS, it would take more than 40 years. Instead, bottom-up approaches need to work to align UDL with complimentary and mutually reinforcing district-wide initiatives, by continually working across departments to engage in discourse about UDL as a framework that embraces many best practices. The goal is not to build UDL one school at a time, but to allow UDL to gain a firmer foothold in educational practices and to concretely demonstrate the benefits to the school district as a whole.

A central message, therefore, is that full-scale implementation of UDL requires bottom-up plus top-down efforts. Systemic change is needed to ensure that UDL is addressed across the organization—that UDL is integrated into the curriculum, that digital materials are accessible, that ample technology tools are in place to more readily allow for multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement for all students. For example, when UDL is infused into a district’s curriculum, it provides lesson plans

that allow for more choice and variability; it provides resources that make it easier for teachers to reach a wide range of students. District-wide curriculums rooted in UDL principles make it easier for teachers to put the pieces in place for all students.

Preparation for the integration phase of implementation requires a systematic action plan such as the one described in this paper. It doesn’t happen by merely increasing professional development to increase staff awareness of UDL, nor through written policies and procedures. In the integration phase, it requires resources, coaching, and reflection across successive years. Individual schools can achieve performance levels of UDL implementation with fidelity, and build UDL school-wide. But UDL needs to grow and flourish system-wide across all grade levels. The synergy between top and bottom is critical to make this happen.

To read more about the MCPS integration phase, see “Leading UDL Implementation with Professional Learning Communities” by Wilson, Ellis and McGrath in these proceedings.

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