

UDL Coaching

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Abstract

A UDL professional learning community (PLC) is a departure from traditional models of professional learning because it requires teachers to confront their current beliefs, construct new knowledge, and participate in inquiry-based, collaborative experiences that support shifts in thinking. Embedding the UDL principles into coaching sessions helps PLC members to confront their existing conceptions about teaching learning. UDL coaching purposefully addresses the three UDL principles by offering 1) multiple ways for educators to build knowledge, 2) multiple pathways to engage and sustain participants' interest over time, and 3) multiple means of supporting teachers' construction of new pedagogical knowledge and skills and application of new instructional strategies. This paper will outline coaching strategies that encourage PLC members to articulate their beliefs about teaching, learning and UDL, and transform these ideas into practice.

Keywords

Professional learning community, Implementation, UDL Coaching.

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, Lansdowne Middle School and Pine Grove Middle School participated in a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Professional Learning Community (PLC) project supported by CAST and the Gates Foundation (see <http://www.udlcenter.org/implementation/fourdistricts> for details). Since 2012, this project has evolved into a variety of formats, supported by Towson University, Kennedy Kreiger Institute and Baltimore County Public Schools. This paper outlines coaching strategies utilized by these projects, as well as in the UDL-THLSE project (see Transforming High School Learning Environments: A Multi-Year Implementation Journey) in these proceedings.

TRADITIONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

School systems throughout the United States are focusing on UDL as a framework for meeting the challenge of designing high-quality curriculum and learning environments that meet the needs of learner variability (Hall, Rose & Meyer, 2012). Teachers are being asked to consider new expectations regarding what students should know and be able to do, and in developing this vision, they are being asked to teach in ways never before contemplated. Key to enabling this change is high-quality professional learning opportunities provided in an environment that is supportive and collaborative. Reconsidering beliefs and practices, or *unlearning* long-held skills and perspectives is a challeng-

ing task that is not currently included in most professional development (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011). Unfortunately, the one-size-fits-all professional development conducted in isolation from daily practice, forcing teachers into passive roles, and lacking reflection and collaboration, is still the norm for many school districts (Varela, 2012). To engage teachers in the complex process of changing their conceptions, professional development should instead focus on changing teacher beliefs, knowledge and practices. According to Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (2011), a significant component of teacher professional development is “accomplishing the serious and difficult tasks of *learning* the skills and perspectives assumed by new visions of practice and *unlearning* the practices and beliefs about students and instruction that have dominated their professional lives to date” (p. 81). It is impossible to accomplish this task without first considering the conceptions about UDL that educators bring to the professional development experience (Berquist & Sadera, 2015).

CONCEPTUAL CHANGE: SHIFTING FOCUS

Conceptual change is generally defined as *learning* that changes an existing conception, such as a belief, an idea, or a way of thinking (Posner, Strike, Hewson & Gertzog, 1982). Conceptual change differs from other types of learning because it is not measured by the acquisition of a specific skill set or by an ability to demonstrate factual knowledge. Rather, conceptual change represents a shift in ones existing ideas and beliefs, and is a method for accommodating knowledge and belief structures (Tillema, 1997). Understanding and successfully applying UDL requires a conceptual change (CAST, 2010). It encourages educators to design or redesign instruction to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners and shifts the focus of change from the student to the curriculum (CAST, 2010). A UDL-PLC is a departure from traditional models of professional learning because it requires teachers to confront their current beliefs, construct their own knowledge, and participate in inquiry-based, collaborative experiences that support corresponding shifts in thinking. Prior to planning any instruction, UDL coaches help PLC members to uncover their current conceptions about teaching and learning and then use this information to plan coaching strategies that instill new ways of thinking about students and instruction.

DESIGNING WITH UDL

Once the existing conceptions of PLC members have been identified, UDL Coaches can begin planning professional learning experiences designed to shift teacher beliefs, knowledge and practices toward alignment with the UDL framework. It is essential for UDL coaches to model the principles of UDL by offering multiple means of engagement, representation, action and expression across all PLC sessions. *Selected examples* are listed below:

Representation.

Teachers benefit from experiencing the UDL principals as learners. By offering multiple means of representation for UDL-PLC materials and engaging in group discussion about personal preferences and needs, teachers witness the value of flexibility and choice

- Create an online site to host all materials. UDL Connect is an excellent tool for sharing and organizing agendas and resources, see <http://community.udlcenter.org/>
- Post instructional materials and resources in addition to providing hard copies.
- Offer a choice in text for PLC members. Many UDL texts now have the option of selecting an online text or a digital text, see UDL Theory to Practice, <http://udltheorypractice.cast.org/login>
- Offer a variety of resources in multiple media formats for individual and group exploration.

Engagement.

- Continually seek feedback from PLC members in order to make modifications to professional learning.
- Provide time to other educators applying UDL in practice. We coordinated classroom-classroom, school-school and district-district observations.
- Link UDL-PLC work to teacher evaluation systems and school administration expectations. (See examples in the Charlotte Danielson- UDL Crosswalk, posted on the National UDL Center site).
- Ask teachers to identify barriers to implementation and address these barriers in PLC meetings as well as in the form of individualized in-time supports as necessary.

Action and Expression.

- Guide the UDL-PLC to set group goals for their joint learning and instructional practices.
- Guide teachers to set and track individual goals for their professional development. Provide in-time supports for the attainment of these goals.

- Provide options for PLC member collaboration via UDL Connect
- Provide options for PLC members to engage in professional learning opportunities in conjunction with PLC meetings. (i.e. attend conferences, participate in UDL Twitter chats, etc.)
- Provide options for PLC members to demonstrate changes to their professional practice.

CONCLUSION

UDL coaching is a valuable component of the UDL-PLC process. Coaches are able to source materials in multiple formats, guide UDL-aligned professional development activities, and provide scaffolded supports to teachers as they acquire new learning and skills and shift their conceptual understanding of teaching and learning. UDL coaching is grounded in understanding teacher beliefs, knowledge and practices. In stark contrast to traditional professional development, UDL coaching is professional learning that offers flexible options, concrete examples, and the opportunity to learn from peers who are on the same journey. By conducting professional development that is in keeping with the UDL principles, UDL coaches provide essential learning opportunities for teachers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the UDL PLC members at Chavez High School, Houston, Texas, Lansdowne Middle School, Baltimore, Maryland, and Pine Grove Middle School, Towson, Maryland for allowing us to work and learn with them.

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