Building UDL Professional Development in Higher Education

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Abstract
The UDL Professional Development Network (UDL-PDN) is a campus-wide, multidisciplinary project that brings faculty together in professional learning communities (PLCs) for exploring UDL guidelines and principles and applying them in their own teaching. PLC members work together in small groups to explore advances in the learning sciences and flexible curricular materials in order to develop a deep understanding of UDL and its application to instruction in higher education.

Keywords
UDL, Professional Learning, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION
Many institutes of higher education have become increasingly interested in the potential of the UDL framework to support instructors tasked with designing accessible and engaging learning environments. Rappolt-Schlichtmann, Daley, and Rose (2012) indicated, "over the past five years, there has been exponential growth in interest surrounding the UDL framework, primarily within education policy and practice" (p.1). Rather than retrofit existing curriculum to meet the needs of student's with diverse needs learner's, supporters of UDL propose that faculty create learning experiences and environments that meet the needs of the greatest number of students possible. UDL favors an inclusive way of thinking about education for all students, especially for learners identified as having special academic needs. Rather than focus on "fixing" or changing our students, UDL focuses on designing learning environments that are flexible.

The UDL framework is effective because it provides an opportunity for researchers and practitioners to collaborate and apply individual expertise with the goal of reaching a more holistic understanding (Rappolt-Schlichtmann, Daley, & Rose, 2012). The UDL guidelines support faculty members seeking to design innovative courses and flexible materials that support learner variability. UDL encourages faculty to create options that challenge the most advanced learners while leveling the playing field for students with special learning needs. Offering options for engagement, representation, action and expression allows all students to succeed by removing barriers and proactively responding to individual learner variability.

This session will describe the strategies used to build a UDL Professional Learning Network (UDL PDN) at Towson University, in Towson, Maryland. These strategies are relevant to individuals who are interested in designing high quality professional UDL learning opportunities.

UDL PDN BACKGROUND
The Universal Design for Learning Professional Development System at Towson University (UDL PDN) was launched in 2013 as a way to build capacity in UDL as it applies to course delivery in higher education. The UDL PDN is currently in its second year and is fully supported by the Office of Academic Innovation, led by the Assistant Provost. Initial findings from year one showed that the PDN was effective and funding has been provided to continue and grown the UDL PDN. A summary of the project is provided online at http://www.towson.edu/provost/provost/oai/professionalDevelopment/udl_learningcommunity.asp

The goal of the UDL PDN is to align instructional practices with the UDL framework, to enhance instructional practice through collaboration with colleagues in professional learning communities and to show positive change in faculty beliefs, knowledge, and skills related to UDL. Components of the UDL PDN include face to face and online professional development, just in time support provided by a UDL facilitator, campus-wide professional learning opportunities, and tool and resource sharing.

In the fall of 2013 the Office of Academic Innovation (OAI) developed a partnership with CAST and the TU Department of Special Education to develop a series of professional learning experiences that would move faculty from UDL exploration to preparation and then to integration. OAI sponsored a workshop to introduce faculty members to the UDL framework. The purpose of this workshop was to provide faculty with an overview of UDL, to identify implications for strengthening instruction in higher education and to recruit interested individuals to become UDL coaches. Following the introductory workshop, prospective coaches completed applications and requested approval from their department chairpersons and Deans. Applications were reviewed by OAI and the first UDL training for coaches took place in October. Coaches met monthly to expand their knowledge of UDL and also participated in a study of *UDL Theory to Practice* by Meyer, Rose, and Gordon (2013). The UDL Coaches were guided by a facilitator who focused on introducing the elements of the UDL framework and offered examples of UDL in classroom practice. UDL coaches also completed a survey designed to identify their current beliefs, knowledge

and practices in regard to UDL. This information was used to design professional learning opportunities. To engage faculty in the complex process of changing their conceptions, the focus of professional learning opportunities was on beliefs, knowledge and practices about teaching and learning.

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). Understanding and successfully applying UDL requires a conceptual change (CAST, 2010). It encourages faculty to design or redesign instruction to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners and shift the focus of change from the student to the curriculum (CAST, 2010). As a result of participation in the UDL PLC, many coaches began to realize that changing curriculum rather than students, was a major paradigm shift. Applying the conceptual change framework provided the UDL facilitator with insight as she designed and developed instruction about UDL and identified appropriate strategies to move coaches from exploring UDL to integrating UDL into their practice. This strategy would later be used by the UDL coaches to support their own professional learning communities.

Dr. David Rose, Chief Education Officer at CAST delivered the keynote address at the Towson University's Provost's January Conference in 2014. Over 200 faculty from across campus attended this event. Numerous faculty members expressed interest in increasing their knowledge of UDL and applied to become members of the first Towson University Professional Development Network. Forty-five faculty members from all six colleges were assigned to five professional learning communities (PLCs). These PLCs were led by faculty coaches and met regularly throughout the spring 2014 semester. PLC members explored UDL by completing readings, participating in interactive professional learning opportunities and attending campus wide events, such as Dr. Samantha Daley's keynote on the impact of emotion in learning. Coaches designed learning opportunities that encouraged PLC members to articulate their beliefs about teaching, learning and UDL and transform these ideas into practice. In the summer of 2014, PLC members also had the opportunity to participate in a three-day summer UDL institute, co-sponsored by the Baltimore County Public Schools. This event featured national experts on UDL, including Dr.

Katie Novak, Dr. George Van Horn (Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation, Columbus, Indiana), Dr. Fran Smith, and Dr. David Rose (CAST). In the fall of 2014, UDL PLC members were encouraged to apply their knowledge of UDL in their practice by redesigning their learning environments, creating flexible assignments or assessments, and building options into their goals, materials, methods or assessments. Any application of the UDL framework to practice was acceptable. The only requirement was that each faculty member post their product on UDL exchange and present at the UDL sharing event held during the fall of 2014.

UDL PDN AND THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

UDL implementation is an iterative process that includes exploration, preparation, integration, scaling and optimizing (Ralabate, 2013). It is an ongoing effort characterized by continuous evaluation and improvement. Lessons learned from the Towson University UDL PDN can support faculty members in higher education who wish to build their own professional learning network or make UDL part of their practice. Sample materials, agendas, and resources used at TU can be viewed at http://community.udlcenter.org/group/udl-for-tu. Additionally, faculty products can be found by visiting UDL Exchange http://udlexchange.cast.org/home and entering "Towson" in the search box.

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