

Professional Development: Are We on the Same Page?

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Abstract

How do we truly integrate and sustain the application of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework to alter teacher practice and improve student outcomes? This session will examine the district-wide implementation of UDL in a Midwestern school district and will feature the systematic planning and implementation of a district-wide professional development program. Participants will explore resources, tools, and practical tips that are needed to support teachers in initial understanding and subsequent continuous application in order to move forward in deepening one's understanding and acquisition of skills to apply the UDL framework in a meaningful manner.

INTRODUCTION

Learner variability exists in every classroom in the world. Educators are required to look differently at how they design instruction to support all learners and ensure all have access to learning. With the inclusion of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and some teacher preparation programs beginning to provide teachers with training in UDL, teachers currently in the field need support and professional development in this area.

Beginning in the early 2000's, a district of over 12,000 students located in a Midwest district introduced Universal Design for Learning as a framework for all educators to design instruction and create flexible and accessible learning environments (Meyer & Rose, 2000). Over the next ten years, the district developed embedded resources to support the expectation that all curricula be filtered through the three principles of UDL and subsequently the nine guidelines and corresponding checkpoints.

Models of UDL professional development have been created and offered to district teachers. Practitioners and paraprofessionals have been provided opportunities to learn more about UDL and how the framework translates to the classroom or learning environment. Participants have been able to identify and begin to develop the needed resources to facilitate successful professional development to support UDL implementation, and understand tools, activities, and similar resources needed to expand teacher understanding and subsequent application of the UDL principles. Thus, having a plan, resources and tools, and the motivation to move forward, everyone can be on the same page to benefit all learners.

THE STORY OF ONE DISTRICT'S PLAN

In 2003, Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation (BCSC) adopted the UDL framework as a tool to drive

instruction at all levels of K-12. As decisions were made in the district, the UDL framework became the standard in which to evaluate the appropriateness of practice and programs.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) was adopted concurrently, as it fit within the UDL framework as a support for teachers in designing their learning environments to become more flexible, accessible, engaging to students. Paradigm shifts began to occur as the adoption of Instructional Consultation Teams (ICT) were implemented at the elementary level to address the disproportionality of minority students in special education (Gravois & Rosenfeld, 2006) and assist teachers in designing classrooms that meets the needs of students with and without disabilities.

Between 2007 and 2011, UDL support for teachers grew from pockets of educators in buildings across the district with limited training in UDL and one district UDL Consultant to half-time UDL Facilitators in every building, and three full time UDL District Coordinators. In this timeline of events, teacher evaluations were also changing across the state, and district leadership created an evaluation (see appendix) that would measure teachers (50%) on what the district valued as the best conceptual framework to design strategic and goal-oriented instructional practices that would allow all students access to curricula.

Understanding the origin and history of BCSC, and valuing the UDL framework as the means to create equitable learning environments for all its students, allows us to delve into the manner in which professional development has evolved in the district. What resources are available and how have they been provided?

RESOURCES FOR UDL IMPLEMENTATION

The increase in district expectations for teachers to implement the UDL framework in their learning environments required support (see Figure 1). BCSC offers a number of resources for teachers and paraprofessionals to engage in a number of professional development opportunities. The district has three UDL District Coordinators, half-time UDL Facilitators in all buildings, and UDL Coaches at the three Title I schools in the district. All of these individuals provide a range of teacher and administrative support for the continuing implementation of UDL in all classrooms.

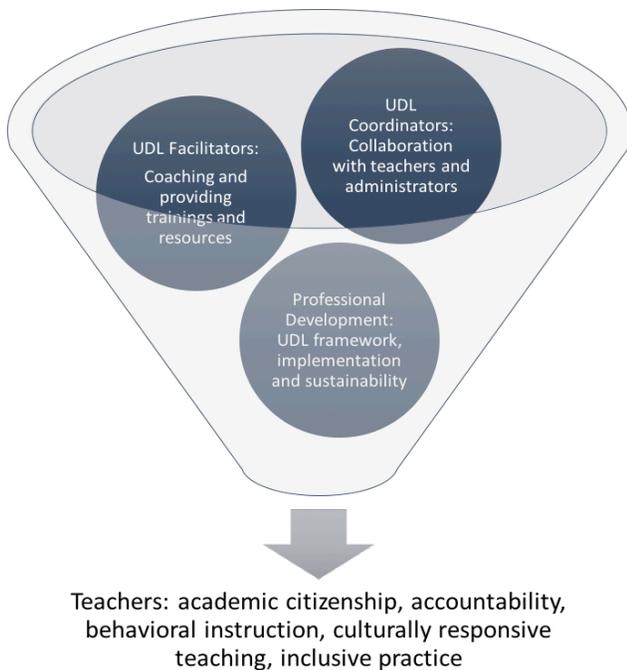


Figure 1: Professional development resources

UDL Coordinators

The UDL Coordinators spearhead district data collection and trainings for PBIS, ICT, and UDL. Using the data to guide the planning in these areas and identify needs, the coordinators perform a host of tasks. Training new teachers, UDL facilitators, and providing UDL training with faculty at the Columbus campus of Indiana University-Purdue University are conducted by the Coordinators. BCSC hosts multiple visitors from around the United States and the world to observe BCSC’s UDL model of implementation and sustainability as it appears in action in classrooms and coordinators manage these visits. Coordinators also present at numerous districts and conferences around the United State, sharing the story of how BCSC has been successful in implementing UDL and building capacity and sustainability to encourage others.

UDL Building Facilitators

The UDL Facilitators serve as support for teachers through coaching, weekly or monthly UDL professional development with their schools’ staff. They fill the needs of the individual teachers as they progress in their understanding and implementation of UDL in their classrooms. Facilitators have designed monthly UDL meetings to further teachers’ understanding of UDL by using the UDL framework to model the use of UDL in instruction as well as expression of knowledge to the staff. Facilitators created a professional learning community (PLC) to guide their UDL trainings and support in buildings. A small number of facilitators have presented UDL in state and national presentations sharing their methods of meeting the needs of a variety of adult learners.

UDL Summer Institute

In 2013, a summer institute was developed to further offer teachers in the district the opportunity to dig deeper into the framework and construct a better understanding of the UDL Principles and guidelines. Keynote speakers from CAST, Inc. have been featured each year along with a number of respected national pioneers in the field who serve as facilitators of breakout sessions during the weeklong institute. Each summer, 150 teachers of different levels of experience and expertise with UDL have attended the UDL Summer Institute. The Institute provides a unique focus each year to encourage all teachers persist in their journey with UDL implementation and build capacity in designing a learning environment that will accommodate all students of all levels of ability.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TOOLS

UDL implementation includes an important component that is often disregarded. Intentionality of planning for learner variability and removing barriers for learners in a learning environment is essential for the success of UDL implementation. Teachers and paraprofessionals in BCSC need only request assistance from their building UDL Facilitator to receive resources to assist them in their intentionality in designing universally. Learning environment observations serve as an effective beginning to learn where in the framework the design of goals, methods, materials and assessments are hitting the mark or needing more attention. UDL Facilitators often coach teachers on a regular basis as they set goals and collaborate to reach those goals in their classrooms. The ongoing support of teachers has been found to be key in effective professional development (Dunst, Bruder, & Hamby, 2015). The UDL Facilitators research strategies, tools and technology that can be shared with teachers to assist in meeting the needs of learners in inclusive learning environments.

UDL facilitators in BCSC have collaborated to create presentations and brainstorm different media in which to provide training to teachers. Online and face-to-face book studies have been offered to allow for convenience and accessibility for teachers. Trainings have been provided individually, in grade-level teams and as an entire staff. Outside resources such as CAST webinars are shared with teachers as another resource. Using surveys and other forms of feedback, facilitators have been able to flexibly and intentionally design multiple opportunities of professional development for all teachers.

CONCLUSION

The planning and fruition of professional development around UDL and its implementation in all learning environments has been a bumpy ride for all concerned in this district. However, BCSC’s fortitude to stay in the forefront of UDL implementation has received both praise and support from CAST, Inc., the originating proponent of UDL. The planning of the UDL professional development has been a balance of the pace and amount of information disseminated to educators and the expectations of educators to

go back to their classrooms, reflect on what they have learned and make changes to their practice as a result of their newly formed conceptual understanding of UDL.

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