

The Students Who Knew They Could

Stephanie Craig, M.Ed.

UDL Facilitator
Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation
Columbus, Indiana, United States
craigs@bcsc.k12.in.us

Kaitlyn Edgren

UDL Facilitator
Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation
Columbus, Indiana, United States
edgrenk@bcsc.k12.in.us

Abstract

The ultimate goal of Universal Design for Learning is to create lifelong expert learners. As Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation moves toward fully implementing the Universal Design for Learning guidelines in all learning environments, institutionalization will require the development of student capacity for UDL language and development of expert learner qualities. This session will examine resources that support teachers and students in the acquisition of the expert learner qualities, explore the role of the UDL Facilitators in BCSC, and provide examples of lessons and strategies to support the development of UDL language for students and methods of data collection to gauge growth of student capacity for understanding UDL language.

Keywords

Universal Design for Learning, expert learner

INTRODUCTION

What is an expert learner? Answers may vary among teachers, administrators and students. However, by using the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework and the six qualities of an expert learner developed and outlined by CAST, an expert learner is best described as motivated and purposeful, knowledgeable and resourceful, and strategic and goal-oriented (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014). Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation (BCSC), by adopting the UDL framework districtwide, uses UDL as the lens through which the design of the learning environment, e.g. learning outcomes, instructional practices, materials and assessments, are viewed. Moving into the next phase of developing expert learners district wide, the Expert Learner Project at the elementary school level began in 2015 as a model for explicit instruction of the learning networks of the brain. Resources at the building and district levels focused on providing support for instruction of UDL expert learner qualities and continued with staff and support staff professional development for advanced understanding of UDL Principles and Guidelines.

BACKGROUND

For nearly a decade, BCSC has focused on implementing the three principles and nine guidelines of UDL. In order to support K-12 teachers as they design engaging learning environments that allow access to information for all students, the district added resources to all buildings to support UDL education and implementation. Over time, state assessment results have shown a steady growth in students improving both in language arts and math (see Figure 1.). Data gathered between 2009 and 2014 also revealed a steady increase in the percent of BCSC students graduating (see Figure 2.).

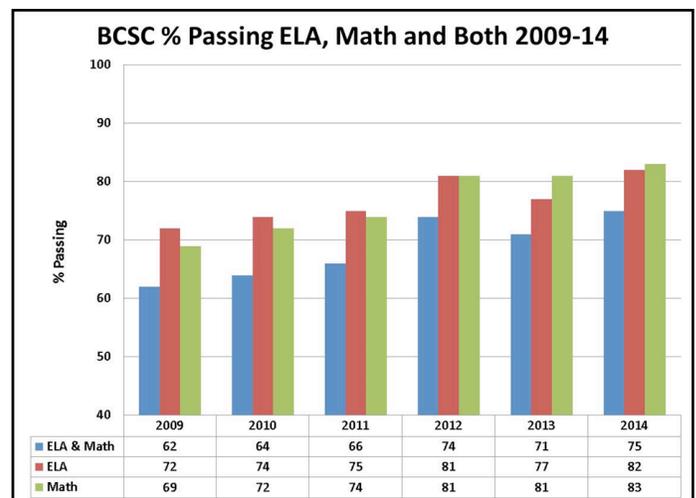


Figure 1. BCSC Passing ELA and Math ISTEP Scores

BCSC DISTRICT-WIDE IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT

With the district's commitment to embedding the UDL framework into learning design at all levels, the need for administrator and staff support and education became apparent. What began with one individual supporting the entire district, has expanded to better meet the needs of teachers and students. In the fall of 2013, BCSC transformed Instructional Consultation Facilitator positions into UDL Facilitator positions throughout eleven elementary schools, two middle schools and three high schools. These new

UDL Facilitators joined three UDL Coordinators, who provide district-wide support with UDL, Positive Behavior Instructional Support (PBIS) and Instructional Consultation Teams (ICT), to provide comprehensive support to K-12 staff. While each building has unique needs, the UDL Facilitator creates and conducts UDL professional development, assists teachers with learning environment design, locates and provides training on appropriate technology in the implementation of UDL guidelines, and supports students directly in classrooms. Three UDL Instructional Coaches are shared among four Title I schools and a fourth UDL Instructional Coach is available for all non-Title I schools in the district.

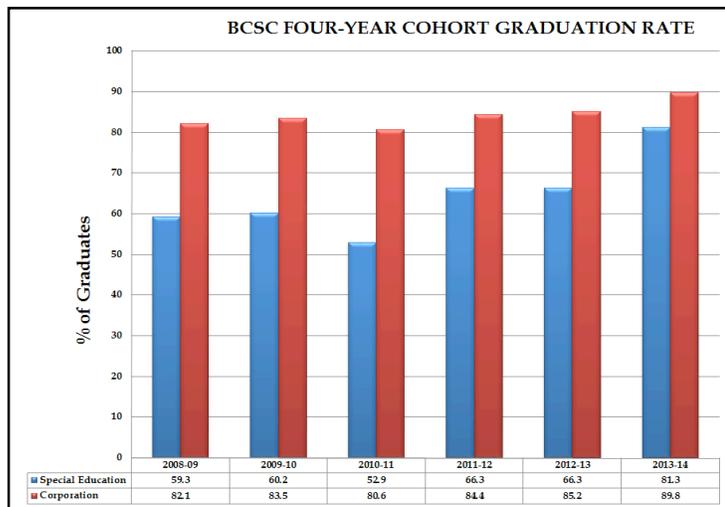


Figure 2. BCSC Four Year Cohort Graduation Rate

To provide additional support, BCSC has developed and conducted for the last three years, a week-long UDL Summer Institute for its teachers and other interested educators. Through both the UDL Summer Institute and support from the UDL Facilitator, along with ongoing professional development throughout the school year, teachers in BCSC have grown in their knowledge, understanding, and classroom implementation of UDL. UDL has been successfully implemented in all buildings, pre-K through adult-ed., and within multiple instructional environments. These include Project Based Learning, Daily 5 Literacy Stations, and blended learning using the itslearning course management system.

Most recently, for pre-K through adult-ed. learners, BCSC crafted a set of School Wide Learning Outcomes (SWLO) based on the UDL guidelines. The purpose of these outcomes is to help students at all levels better understand the language of UDL, discover how they learn best, and ultimately become lifelong expert learners. Even at the elementary level, the SWLO were adopted directly from the UDL guidelines to promote consistency throughout the

district and provide an accurate tool for analyzing growth. The AEI/Brookings Institute (2015) report on poverty and opportunity strongly recommended that schools measure the "soft skills" as well as content standards. These skills, essential in both schools and the work place, are important in helping individuals attain success. Examples include following directions, accepting feedback, cooperating with others, focusing on tasks and completing them, regulating feelings and making responsible decisions. These "soft skills" can be just as important to develop as content knowledge, yet they are not measured by standardized tests. The evidence supports BCSC's decision to implement this method as a means to measure the whole child and not rely solely on an academic snapshot of student performance.

THE EXPERT LEARNER PROJECT

With the integration of the SWLO, teachers required support in understanding and teaching the language to students in grades K-6. The Expert Learner Project began with three elementary teachers requesting intensive support and collaboration in the classroom as they began teaching students the language and qualities of an expert learner. The TEAM (Together Everyone Achieves More) teachers, from two classes of multi-age students in grades 1-3, and a fifth-grade teacher, began by setting aside time each week with the UDL Facilitator to provide instruction on the focused SWLO and develop the students' SWLO language capability. All three teachers wanted to teach the language and skills as well as continue their UDL journey within the context of student Passion Projects. For the first semester of the 2015-2016 school year, the short term goals were as follows:

1. Students will show skill acquisition of SWLO and a deeper understanding of the language by achieving at a 3 point average or above on the SWLO survey taken in January.
2. Students will identify and show understanding of at least 3 qualities of an expert learner by description or use of specific language.

The first step was to collect baseline data of students' understanding of an expert learner. There were three methods of data collection in September, 2015:

1. Students were given the choices to write, draw a picture with description or dictate to an adult their response to the prompt, "What is an expert learner?"
2. A random selection of six students per classroom were given the same prompt and replied via video to the above-mentioned prompt to track progress.

- Students self-assessed on the SWLO with a survey on BCSC’s online learning management system (LMS), itslearning.

Student responses in all three classes were scored based on a 4-point rubric created by the teachers and UDL Facilitator. Students’ understanding of SWLO was surveyed via the online LMS, itslearning. Students assessed themselves on a scale of 1-4 on their skills as expert learners. This data was gathered at the district level and classroom data was released to teachers to drive the focus of instructional support.

The Expert Learner Project consisted of a weekly mini lesson. Students were instructed on the three learning networks of the brain, Affective, Recognition and Strategic (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014), the focused SWLO of the week, a very basic understanding of neuroplasticity, and the qualities of a Growth Mindset (Dweck, 2006). Concurrently, teachers and the UDL Facilitator focused on UDL guideline implementation in the learning environment to support the Expert Learner Project. Strategies and tools were explicitly connected to the SWLO for students to transfer what they were learning about the brain and the qualities of an expert learner to their own learning abilities and needs.

SHORT TERM GOAL RESULTS IN EXPERT LEARNER PROJECT

The first phase of the Expert Learner Project ended at the end of January, 2016 with the second data collection. The baseline collected in September, 2015 showed that a total of 76% of the student responses showed no understanding of an expert learner or described an expert learner as a “smart” and “compliant” student (see Figure 3.). A total of 24% of students in September responded with a partial to extended description of an expert learner. No students used UDL language or referred to SWLO. Within five months of the introduction of the Expert Learner Project, data showed a remarkable increase in student understanding and ability to articulate their understanding of an expert learner. As the first phase of the project came to a close, 54% of students responded with a partial to extended description of an expert learner, and 22% of students responded using UDL language as they described an expert learner.

In September, students responded to the online survey. Only 7% of the students in the Project classes assessed themselves as proficient (see Figure 4). However, in January, 30% of students in these classes assessed themselves as proficient (see Figure 5). This shows a dramatic rise in the confidence of students in their ability to be more resourceful, motivated and strategic learners. The data supported the idea of setting aside time each week to discuss and

teach students how to be expert learners. The teachers and UDL Facilitator planned to begin the second phase of the Expert Learner Project as they integrated the weekly Genius Hour, continuing with UDL implementation and direct instruction of the expert learner qualities within the context of students’ Passion Projects. Each step of the project will explicitly connect both the UDL implementation of the teacher and the SWLO of the students.

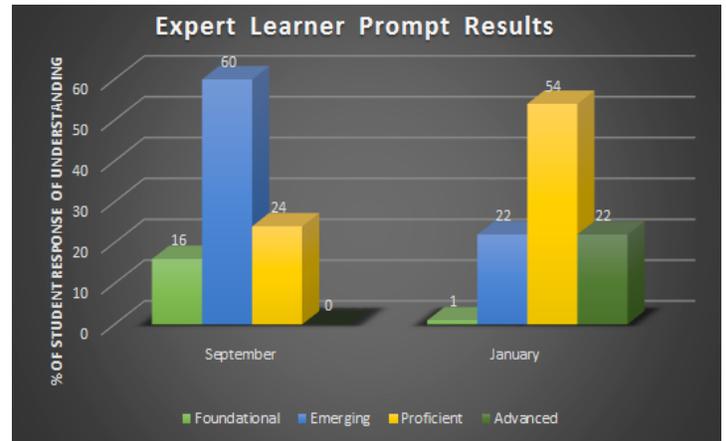


Figure 3. Graph showing student responses to expert learner prompt in September and January

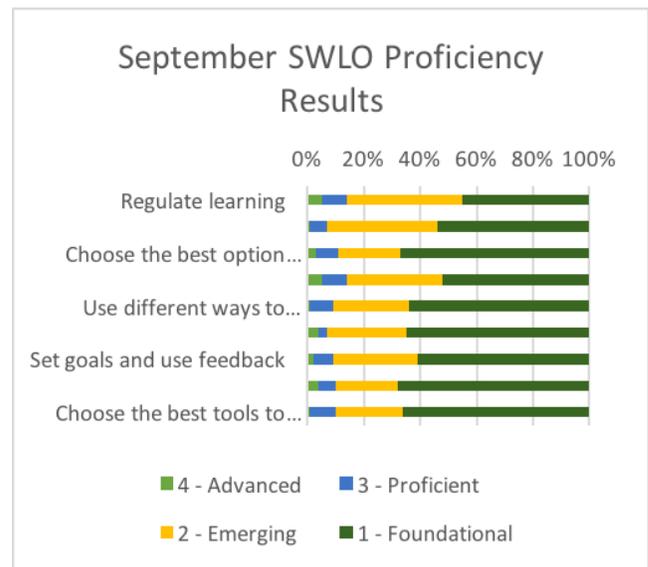


Figure 4. September, 2015: School Wide Learning Outcomes Results

OTHER TEACHERS AND OTHER METHODS

Many other teachers and UDL Facilitators have provided resources and shared strategies to teach UDL language and connect the SWLO to the learning of all students pre-K through adult-ed. While many schools have approached the

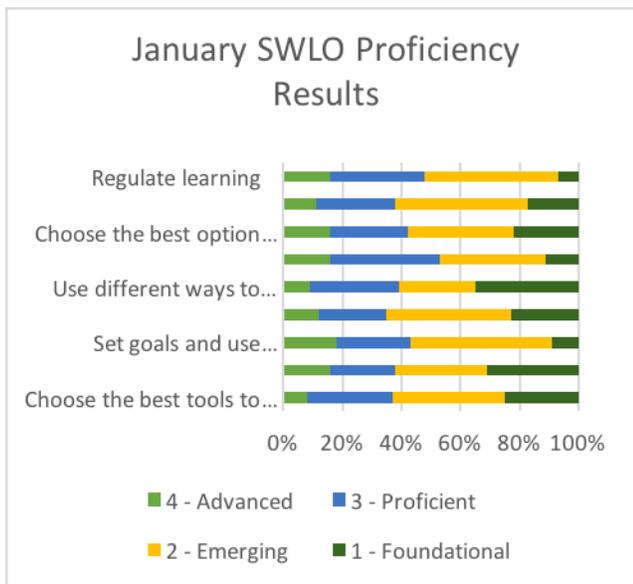


Figure 5. January, 2016: School Wide Learning Outcomes Results

instruction of the SWLO language differently, some schools focused on one SWLO per week. Others focused on a specific UDL principle and the corresponding SWLO. Some of the strategies are listed below:

- Posting the weekly SWLO with the daily content goals and making connections through discussion.
- Focusing on each of the six qualities of an expert learner by displaying large brain drawings showing the three learning networks of the brain (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014).
- Beginning the day with a class pledge and quick pair-and-share of how students plan to grow their brain, i.e. challenge themselves, use growth mindset self-talk, be independent learners.
- Using a daily response journal for students to examine daily learning outcomes and plan a course to reach the outcomes.
- Discussing SWLO as a class and then developing individual student SWLO presentations with personal connections and applications.
- Helping students reflect and set goals using SWLO and UDL language.
- Creating and using Expert Learner and growth mindset bulletin boards to teach students.
- Using multimedia tools such as Voki to create SWLO explanations.

CONCLUSION

As the UDL journey for BCSC continues, the philosophy behind the UDL framework and the existing district resources will allow for a more efficient and successful passage. The focus of the Expert Learner Project, as well as other instructional methods at all levels, has been to have students grow in their meta-cognition of expert learning and develop into independent learners with self-efficacy who advocate for their needs. The conclusion of the data collected thus far in the Expert Learner Project supports the need to instruct students on the “soft skills” and to invite them to take ownership of their learning regardless of age. With the ever present need to instruct and consider the learner as a whole, and the evidence-based success experienced thus far, BCSC will push forward in its current direction with UDL as the guide to measure effective and strategic instruction of expert learning.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Stephanie Craig and Kate Edgren are UDL Facilitators at the elementary level in the Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation in Columbus, Indiana. They would like to thank Mrs. Justis and her fifth grade students at Mount Healthy Elementary School and Mrs. Royalty and Miss Ruddell and their students at L. Frances Smith Elementary for opening their classrooms and embracing UDL. In addition, they would like to thank building administrators, Brett Boezeman, Jay Payne and Amy Wetherald for their encouragement throughout this project and the direction and support from Dr. George Van Horn, Director of Special Education.

REFERENCES

- AEI/Brookings Institute (2015). *Opportunity, responsibility and security: A consensus plan for reducing poverty and restoring the American dream*. Retrieved from <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2015/12/aei-brookings-poverty-report/full-report.pdf>
- Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Meyer, A, Rose, D & Gordon, D. (2014). In Meyer, A Editor, Rose, D Editor & Gordon, D. Editor (Eds.), *Universal design for learning: Theory and practice*. Wakefield, MA: CAST Professional Publishing.