

# Universally Designed Professional Learning

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this session is to highlight Universal Design for Learning as a framework for designing highly effective professional learning experiences. All learners vary in the way they engage with new information, perceive content, and in the strategies they use to make sense of knowledge. Professional learning opportunities must recognize and address variability in adult learners, just as we recognize it in younger students. While the UDL framework can enhance the design and delivery of professional learning on any topic, it is crucial to apply and model the foundations of UDL when delivering professional learning on UDL.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Baltimore County Public School (BCPS) district serves just over 113,000 students in Baltimore County, Maryland. The district is committed to providing high quality professional learning to over ten thousand teachers and school based administrators in BCPS. Guided by the Chief Academic Officer and the Chief of Organizational Effectiveness, district leaders participated in training on the design and delivery of high quality professional learning during the 2017-2018 academic year. This professional learning focused on the foundations of adult learning and the elements of effective professional development. Participants were also guided through the development of a professional learning session in their content area with a UDL lens that included careful attention to learning environment and flexible goals, assessments, methods and materials. For the purpose of this paper and presentation, the content examples shared will be about UDL, but readers should note that the UDL framework can be used when designing *any* professional learning experience.

## ADULT LEARNING

Universal Design for Learning encourages educators to consider variability from the inception of course design as a way to meet the needs of all learners. Similarly, UDL helps those responsible for professional development to plan sessions that reduce learning barriers and facilitate meaningful interaction. All learning that occurs under the UDL guidelines is grounded in advances in the learning sciences and our knowledge of good pedagogy, or the art and science of teaching children. When considering UDL in professional learning, we must look to the art and science of helping adults learn, or andragogy, as explored by Knowles (1980). While Knowles offers a multitude of strategies for working with adults, his initial work does not take into account the variability that exists in any given professional learning session. In order to recognize the

importance of planning for variability in advance, it is useful for those responsible for professional learning to apply a UDL lens to the six foundations of adult learning described by Knowles. (1998). For example, we know that for adults, their emotional state is inextricably tied to their ability to learn. To learn, adults must be emotionally comfortable with the learning situation. When we feel afraid, our brains shut down to learning and new information can't be absorbed (Knowles, 1984). The UDL framework acknowledges that we must plan to recruit learner interest from the inception of our lesson. Recruiting interest is not merely offering choice and relevance, it also means reducing threats and distractions. In a professional learning session we often ask teachers and leaders to think about practices that may depart from what they have previously learned. If the intent of professional learning is immediate implementation rather than allowing time for exploration and preparation, adult learners may be less receptive to the new content being presented. Knowing that adults must feel safe to learn is not enough. We must provide adults with options to make sense of, explore and prepare to integrate their new learning. See Table 1. Adult Learning and UDL Professional Learning, for examples of how to apply the UDL framework to adult learning.

## ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017) reviewed 35 methodologically rigorous studies that showed a link between professional development, teacher practice and student outcomes in order to identify the common elements in each. They identified seven elements of effective PD:

- Content focused
- Incorporate active learning
- Support collaboration
- Use models of effective practice
- Provide coaching and expert support
- Offer feedback and reflection
- Of sustained duration

Reviewing this list with a “UDL lens“ provides a structure for those designing professional development to incorporate best practices in the design of professional learning with their knowledge of proactive, flexible instructional supports. Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017) determined that the model that is most successful in incorporating all of these elements is a Professional Learning Community

(PLC). To learn more about UDL PLCs, see Chapter One, Using the UDL Framework as a Guide for Professional Learning, in *UDL: Moving from Exploration to Integration* (Berquist, 2017).

**Table 1. Adult Learning and UDL Professional Learning**

<b>Adult Learning Foundation (Knowles, 1998)</b>	<b>Application to Universally Designed Professional Learning (selected examples)</b>
<b>Emotions:</b> <i>Adults must feel safe to learn.</i>	Plan in advance for time to explore and prepare new learning and determine how the information fits with current conceptions ( <i>UDL guideline: Recruit interest</i> )
<b>History:</b> <i>Adults bring to learning experiences their own histories.</i>	Acknowledge that many of the answers are in the room. Highlight the experiences that the participants bring to your shared work. ( <i>UDL guideline: Sustain effort and persistence</i> )
<b>Knowing why:</b> <i>Adults need to know the “why” of learning.</i>	Provide clarity in goals for your session. Encourage participants to articulate why the session is relevant to their work. Give time for personal goal setting. ( <i>UDL guideline: provide options for executive functions, sustain effort and persistence</i> )
<b>Self-direction:</b> <i>Adults want agency in their learning.</i>	Ensure that there is choice in learning experiences planned during each session. ( <i>UDL guideline: provide options for expression and communication</i> )
<b>Internalizing learning:</b> <i>Adults need practice to internalize learning.</i>	Use case study analysis, role play, and protocols to ensure that participants have time to move beyond initial learning and practice new skills. ( <i>UDL guideline: provide options for executive functions, sustain effort and persistence</i> )
<b>Problem-centered learning:</b> <i>Adults have a problem-centered orientation to learning.</i>	Ground professional learning in authentic tasks. Encourage adults to bring relevant problems of practice to the session. ( <i>UDL guideline: provide options for expression and communication, provide options for comprehension</i> )

## UNIVERSALLY DESIGNED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The process for designing a professional learning should closely mirror the lesson planning process. Individuals responsible for professional learning are encouraged to first consider proactive learning environment supports and then determine a specific goal, formative assessment and related methods and materials to support the session goal.

When presenting on UDL, it is essential to model the framework in your practice. Opening a session with a discussion of relevancy and choice, followed by asking participants to complete the same learning task, or a long PowerPoint presentation on options for representing content in different ways, does not represent best practice. For additional information on designing professional learning experiences that have utilized the UDL framework to move schools, districts, and states from an exploration of UDL to integration and, ultimately, to scaling see Chapter One, Using the UDL Framework as a Guide for Professional Learning, in *UDL: Moving from Exploration to Integration* (Berquist, 2017).

## REFERENCES

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