

A Future Filled With UDL: One Middle School's Vision

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Abstract

Is Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in your future? The principal and teachers of a middle school in Wilmington, Delaware, along with the ACCESS Project of the University of Delaware, are on their second year of UDL Implementation. In this breakout session multiple perspectives will be shared regarding schoolwide UDL implementation. Accomplishments and barriers encountered during the first two years will be shared as well as a plan for moving forward. The transformation of the middle school, while slow, has begun and a future filled with Universal Design for Learning is the ultimate goal.

Keywords

Implementation, coaching, vision, collective efficacy, Universal Design for Learning, professional learning opportunities

INTRODUCTION

Universal Design for Learning, when implemented in a strategic way, has been proven to improve instruction and optimize teaching and learning for all individuals (Berquist, 2017). It is a framework based on over thirty years of research in developmental psychology, neuroscience, computer science and architecture (Rappolt-Schlichtmann, Daley & Rose, 2012). Given that variability is predictable of among learners, UDL is a lens on professional development, instruction, learning and attainment of goals. All individuals are exclusive and learn in ways that are unique to them (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014). UDL provides a scientifically valid framework (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014). When paired with deliberate implementation strategies, it can help change the future of a classroom, school, district or state.

TWO YEARS OF INSIGHT

The middle school was deemed a Focus School in 2016 by the Delaware Department of Education. This determination was based on statewide assessment data that showed low achievement and lack of progress over a number of years in one or more subgroups. (Demonstrating that a SEA's Lists of Reward, Priority, and Focus Schools Meet ESEA Flexibility Definitions, n.d.).

The district's success plan called on state and local groups to help increase student achievement and increase educator use of research-based instructional practices. The Adapting Curriculum and Classroom Environments for Student Success (ACCESS) Project from the University of Delaware's Center for Disabilities Studies assisted with improving teacher practices through Universal Design for

Learning. The project began as a ten-week pilot project in three English Language Arts classrooms. The ACCESS Project's instructional coaches provided professional learning opportunities consisting of individualized coaching sessions with embedded self-reflection, classroom observations, modeling of instructional strategies, facilitation of planning sessions and in-person workshops. Participants met on a weekly basis and focused on the UDL Principle of Multiple Means of Representation. This choice of focus coincided with the teachers' annual success goal of increasing vocabulary acquisition. After cohort data was shared with the principal indicating an increase in UDL practices, the principal decided to extend the UDL cohort into sixth, seventh, and eighth grade English Language Arts classrooms the following year. During this time, teachers received both UDL-focused professional development and help transforming their classrooms into universally designed spaces with flexible seating. Again, teacher practices grew in terms of using the UDL framework to eliminate barriers in classroom instruction. Student achievement also increased within the special education and English Learner subgroups. The second year, ACCESS instructional coaches were asked to join the middle school's Building Leadership Team to infuse UDL language into both the school's vision and mission statements. UDL lead teachers were identified and began coaching and observing fellow teachers in the English Language Arts classrooms to build capacity and to strengthen instruction. Multiple Means of Engagement, a UDL principle, became the school's priority and professional development occurred as a school-wide initiative. UDL implementation extended to all sixth, seventh, and eighth grade math classrooms where ACCESS Project coaches worked together with a school/district math coach to implement a newly adopted curriculum. Monthly cycles of lesson planning, observation and coaching helped to improve instruction to include goals, collaboration and student and teacher self-reflection. Teachers in inclusive classrooms focused on co-teaching strategies to help engage and challenge all learners, while improving communication with one another.

TURNING UDL INTO A VISION

Over the course of the collaboration, the most influential decision has been the alignment of the school's vision and mission statements. Through the building leadership team, the heightened importance of Multiple Means of Engagement has been disseminated into the school's various de-

partments. The school now has a common language when it discusses engagement of ALL learners. As a result, a shift in educator thinking is emerging and teachers are starting to believe that all students can learn under a well-designed environment.

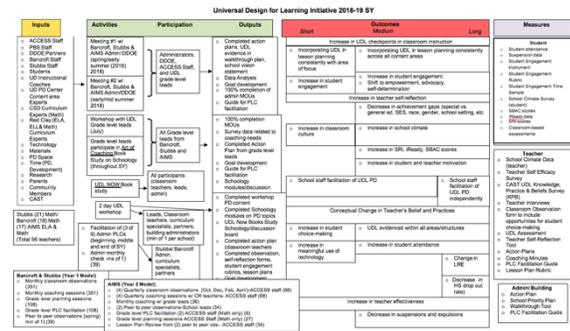


Figure 1. ACCESS Project UDL Logic Model
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REFLECTING ON THE PAST

Throughout the UDL initiative, a logic model was implemented as a program evaluation tool used to analyze inputs, activities, outcomes, and assumptions about the application of UDL. Particular attention was paid to the specific activities and their direct connection to outcomes. Through this process, assumptions were made regarding the readiness for the shift in mindset that accompanies UDL implementation. Two overlooked assumptions were the ideas of collective efficacy and the effectiveness of the rollout of professional development.

Collective Efficacy

The culture of a school is the best indicator that an initiative will take hold. A culture that encourages risks, acceptance and growth is one that will have the most impact on student achievement (Donohoo, Hattie and Eells, 2018). While Anne Donnellan’s concept of the Least Dangerous Assumption (1984) has been primarily attributed to students with significant cognitive disabilities, its meaning can also be attributed to the lack of collective efficacy at the middle school. The concept states “that in the absence of conclusive data, educational decisions ought to be based on assumptions which, if incorrect, will have the least dangerous effect on the likelihood that students will be able to function independently as adults. We should assume that poor performance is due to instructional inadequacy rather than to student deficits” (Donnellan, 1984, p.141). In the beginning of each cohort, there were assumptions made about students who were disengaged in instruction. Biased assumptions of the strengths and weaknesses of students with disabilities, English learners and students of color were prevalent throughout the school. Too often, blame was assigned to parents or

students seen as intrinsically unmotivated. Phrases such as “These kids can’t” or “These kids won’t”, riddled conversations at the start of each year. The lack of collective efficacy was indirectly influencing student achievement. Teacher perceptions were colored by the belief that very little could be done to influence student achievement.

When educators lack a sense of collective efficacy, decisions about instruction are impacted. Teachers were not taking specific courses of action because they felt they or their students lacked the capabilities to achieve positive outcomes. (Donohoo, Hattie & Eells, 2018). The culture at the school reflected acceptance of the status quo. With a lack of collective efficacy, educators are “more likely to ascribe failure to students’ lack of abilities, seek exclusion for challenging students and experience higher levels of stress” (Donohoo, Hattie & Eells, 2018, p.42). Ownership of collective efficacy was the implicit assumption at the start of implementation by the ACCESS Project. Reflection on the barriers to implementation led us to pinpoint exactly where the breakdown occurred. To combat the assumptions about the capabilities of the students and the teachers, a more thorough dive into the need for collective efficacy and Universal Design for Learning would have been a great starting place. More time should have been spent fostering an acceptance of UDL and empowering teachers to trust that they could be change agents. While some professional development about Carol Dweck’s Growth Mindset (2008) was conducted before the UDL initiative began, more information and practice are necessary to help reshape the beliefs about the aptitude of the students. In order to expand on the power of collective efficacy, work in cultural competence will be needed to help uncover the unintentional biases that are prevalent in the school culture and help teachers know how to work through those biases and eliminate them.

Coaching through a UDL Lens

In addition to fostering collective efficacy, the integration of UDL across school districts, statewide initiatives, and professional development were areas targeted for consideration. Due to the middle school’s status of being a focus school, many Delaware Department of Education groups and other outside agencies were involved in implementing various initiatives. In order to incorporate UDL across those initiatives, the ACCESS Project should have facilitated discussion regarding the alignment and integration of UDL. More time spent learning about UDL and how to use it as a framework for implementation would have been beneficial. Using UDL as a lens to view all initiatives including Professional Learning Communities, Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports, Compassionate Schools, mentoring partnerships, etc., could have eliminated barriers related to the prioritization and implementation of multiple initiatives. While UDL was incorporated in the vision and mission of the middle school, the idealization that UDL could be a system-wide decision-making tool

(Novak, 2016) was never fully internalized by the teachers and administration. Teachers began to see UDL as just another “thing on their plate.” The ACCESS Project staff viewed UDL as the vehicle to integrate various school initiatives, however building leadership and staff did not immediately make this connection. Those who design innovation or lead change are typically far more committed to the innovation than those who are expected to implement.” (Hirsch & Killion, 2009, p.465) The fact remains that more professional development, honest conversations, and a collaborative plan to use UDL as the impetus to drive all initiatives would have been beneficial. For the educators to take ownership of the initiative, they need to be involved in the entire planning process. Based on how adults learn and because they have a world of academic, social and emotional experience behind them, the professional development/coaching needed to be skillfully integrated into their lived experience, making them an active participant in their learning (Pappas, 2014). They needed to see the relevance of UDL in addition to being provided with options for choice and design. These components would have helped tailor the individual needs of the learner and as a result, increase knowledge and application of UDL.

FUTURE GOALS

Including More Stakeholders

Implementation of a new framework must occur in complex, multi-leveled systems in order to build capacity. Addressing multiple levels simultaneously has been found to result in improved implementation success (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2017). The project hopes to promote the belief that UDL can help all students access and participate in the general education curriculum and adopt the concept of Least Dangerous Assumption when making curricular decisions. Establishing UDL at the core of the mission and vision of a school fosters the belief that curriculum can be made accessible to all students, and that all students can and will learn. This belief is critical to the implementation of UDL across all systems levels. On a district level, all stakeholders need to gain knowledge and understanding of UDL. This will allow them to assist with district initiatives and to support the instructional coaches and administrators who are strategically implementing UDL in their schools or classrooms. With increased understanding, UDL can be viewed as a framework for supporting all learning, rather than “just one more thing” on teachers’ plates. On a state level, the ACCESS Project will continue to have collaborative conversations with the Delaware Department of Education to help infuse UDL into the many endeavors. ACCESS will also work with state and district administration to plan for the expansion and promotion of UDL across additional stakeholder groups including parents and community members.

Universally Designed Coaching

Throughout the two years of coaching at the middle school, one of the most frequent barriers was the level of participant knowledge regarding UDL practices. Generally, classroom teachers were consistent with offering flexible seating and physical access to materials based on UDL observations. However, evidence of a deeper level of UDL knowledge and application was not in evidence. Several participants stated, “This is good teaching and what I already do.” Upon reflection, there needs to be an explicit professional development focus on identifying curriculum barriers to meeting lesson goals, purposeful elimination of those barriers with the use of the UDL Framework, and the use of appropriate supports and scaffolds. In order to address barriers within coaching, the structure of the coaching cycle needs to be universally designed. While coaching was thought to be individualized, the current coaching cycle reflects a one-size-fits-all structure. This is believed to be a barrier to the understanding and use of the UDL framework in lesson planning. A structure that meets the needs of all teachers is needed in order to maximize learning. Teachers should be able to choose from a variety of modes of study ranging from book studies, online learning, and coaching cycles structured around their learning needs. Further research about what this may look like are under investigation but may include options for teacher-centered and student-centered coaching frameworks.

CONCLUSION

As the UDL initiative gains momentum in the state of Delaware, the middle school is working towards full implementation and is leading the way for other schools in the state. While UDL implementation is unique to each individual system, the middle school and the ACCESS Project are diligently focused on a future where ALL students are succeeding.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the staff of the middle school for accepting us and making us feel part of the school. Special thank you to Dr. Susan Huffman, Dr. Dawn Downes, Victoria Garvey, Monique Taylor-Gibbs, and Steven Jackson. Thank you for learning with us and beginning a journey on the path to UDL implementation.

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