Avoiding the Pitfalls and Staying True to UDL

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Abstract
As practitioners of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), we must be mindful of our presumptions and cultural biases surrounding education. Although many of us strive for educational change, our cultural conceptions of education are still affected and partly defined by traditional paradigms, including narrow perceptions of success, good behavior, participation, collaboration, and the roles of teacher and student. Through mindfulness and intentionality, we can avoid the pitfalls and stay true to UDL.

Keywords
UDL, culture, funds of knowledge, mindfulness.

INTRODUCTION
Everything we see and do, how we perceive and interact with others, is filtered through the culture. Culture is multi-faceted. As our experience grows, peer groups expand, and beliefs and values evolve, culture forms and shapes our identity. In spite of this constant evolution of our cultural identity and cultural conceptions, our deepest beliefs and values can remain firmly rooted. As educators, we must be aware of our cultural identity and reflect on how it affects our teaching practice. We must also be aware that for many of us, the traditional paradigm of education is part of our cultural identity.

BACKGROUND
Many teachers who design learning environments were raised and educated within the sphere of traditional education, one that defines teachers as content experts and consigns students to passively receive information. In that conventional setting, desired classroom behavior frequently amounts to compliance. Antiquated systems of education focus on administrative issues such as test scores, graduation rates, and various rating systems tied to funding. The traditional system of education that informed many of today's teachers frequently assumes that the brain takes in information in only two ways: textually (read it) and auditorily (listen to it). This same traditional system also limits students to showing what they know on worksheets, packets, and other resources created by one-size-fits-all textbook companies, not by educators or curriculum designers. When a student does not succeed within these inflexible parameters, they may be labeled with a disability. Collectively, our experiences in these restricted educational settings contributes to our fund of knowledge, or the "the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. 72). Culture is responsible for our broad understanding of the world, while funds of knowledge are responsible for our individual views and experiences. For many teachers, the traditional system of education remains influential in their educational practice.

In the blog *Dangerously Irrelevant: Technology, Leadership and the Future of Schools*, a recently graduated high school senior posted: "I want to be moving around the room, working with other students to solve a real-world problem that can eventually tie back into what we are actually learning in the class. Students should want every class to go on longer and be surprised when the bell rings because the period went by so fast. They should not be checking the clock every five minutes hoping for a random fire drill that will speed up the hour, and then waiting at the door for five minutes at the end of the period staring down the second hand as it travels endlessly around the clock. Textbook teaching allows these things to happen, and it is really a tragedy for both students and teachers" (Mcleod, 2012).

Universal Design for Learning eliminates the conditions that result in student apathy by shifting the notion of disability from the student to the learning environment. It also shifts the focus of education from administrative issues to student issues. UDL prepares students to be experts in their own learning, to be purposeful and motivated, resourceful and knowledgeable, strategic and goal-directed. By supporting the three brain networks (affective, recognition, and strategic) through multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression, UDL proactively supports learner variability.

MINDFULNESS AND UDL PRACTITIONERS
For all of its shortcomings, the traditional system of education in which many of today's teachers were raised can be redeemed by those same teachers. Outstanding teachers have always been well represented in our schools. They have instinctively formed positive relationships with students and encouraged them to think deeply about learning, their place in the world, and how to undertake

meaningful, rigorous challenges. When I was a kid, we always played school, mimicking the way good teachers talked, the things they did in class, their system of discipline, their expectations for homework, and their relationship with students. When we mature seeing the same model of education day after day, year after year, it undeniably becomes the defining factor in our cultural conception of education.

If you think back to when you were first introduced to Universal Design for Learning, you may remember feeling some cognitive dissonance even though you believed it truly was the best thing for your students and your teaching practice. You may have even said, "I'm already doing that."

Cognitive dissonance is essential to redefining cultural conceptions necessary to implement UDL practices. Cognitive dissonance is what growth feels like. In her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, Zaretta Hammond defines culture on three levels: surface culture (observable elements such as food, dress, holidays); shallow culture (unspoken rules); and deep culture (beliefs and norms) (2015, p. 24). The first two levels will change and shift as our experiences and interactions expand, but the deepest level of culture is slower to change. Hammond compares it to the "root system of a tree" (24). Our cultural conceptions of education are found in this deepest layer of culture and are not easily changed. As UDL practitioners, we must be mindful of how our cultural conceptions can inform our practices. Even when we commit to UDL implementation, we must remain mindful of the fact that our beliefs will likely change more slowly than our practices.

Even the most dedicated UDL practitioners can be drawn back to the traditional paradigm: packets; long periods of direct instruction; assumptions and labels about students' skills, interests, and lifestyles; limited definitions of success; and limited options for representation and expression. What can we do about it? We can be aware of how our cultural experiences with education shape our practices, we can cultivate a growth mindset, and we can look to the UDL framework and our professional learning networks to help us continue to redefine our cultural conceptions of education. We can cast students as co-designers so that they are represented in all aspects of the learning environment design.

Above all, we must be aware that UDL is greater than the sum of its parts. It is not merely a framework of three principles and nine guidelines. UDL is a commitment to making school work for all students. It is a commitment to removing labels from students and recognizing that disability does not reside within students but within environments. UDL is a commitment to continued professional growth and reflection on our teaching practices. UDL is sharing power and design with all learners. UDL says that variability exists in all students and that learning opportunities and learning environments must be designed to the very edges of learner variability.

A video on the Happify Youtube Channel called "Why Mindfulness is a Superpower: An Animation" delivers a simple and accessible definition of mindfulness narrated by Dan Davis: "Mindfulness is the ability to know what's happening in your head at any given moment without getting carried away by it" ("Why Mindfulness," 2015). UDL practitioners must be ever mindful of their classroom practices, behaviors, and interactions. They must also be mindful of contingencies that might influence their commitment to UDL. Colleagues who do not believe in or practice UDL, the pressure to perform on standardized tests, and district practices or philosophies that perpetuate the myth of the average student can challenge beliefs. If mindfulness is objective self-awareness, then UDL mindfulness is knowing your cultural conceptions, and being aware of challenges to one's dedication to UDL.

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