Australian National Curriculum: Applications of the Principles of UDL

Dr. David Evans
University of Sydney
NSW, Australia
david.evans@sydney.edu.au

Sarah Humphreys
Board of Studies, Teaching & Educational Standards
Sydney, NSW, Australia
sarah.humphreys@bostes.nsw.edu.au

Geraldine Gray
Catholic Education Commission
Sydney, NSW, Australia
gerry.gray@cecnsw.catholic.edu.au

Abstract
Australia has embarked on the development of a curriculum for all students using a three-dimensional design. A challenge has been how to provide curriculum access for students with extensive needs. This presentation will demonstrate how the application of principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in the development of the Australian Curriculum has resulted in a framework that allows teachers the flexibility to personalize learning for all students.

Keywords
Curriculum; disability; flexibility; UDL implementation.

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Curriculum sets consistent national standards. It sets out what students will learn and teachers will teach through content and achievement standards as they progress through school from Foundation (first school year) to Year 12 (ACARA, 2015a).

The design of the Australian Curriculum provided the Australian Government, through the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA), the opportunity to develop a "high quality curriculum for all Australian students, one that promotes equity and excellence in education" (ACARA, 2015b, para 1). In designing the Australian Curriculum it needed to be shown that students with extensive needs were able to access the content "on the same basis as" their peers (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005).

An initial proposal required additional material to be 'added' prior to the existing learning areas – extending learning areas back into 'pre-foundational' content. Debate over this proposal was extensive, with concern put forward that students with disabilities would not be afforded "rigorous, relevant and engaging learning programs drawn from a challenging curriculum" with specific focus to their individual learning needs (ACARA, 2015b, para 1). This idea to have a 'prior to Foundation' addition to the Australian Curriculum was eventually not accepted, as it was considered not to uphold the intent of the Disability Standards for Education (2005), part of the Disability Discrimination Act (1992).

A revised proposal was developed applying principles of UDL through utilizing the inherent flexibility built into the Australian Curriculum framework.

PHASES OF UDL IMPLEMENTATION

Curriculum Design

In addressing the complexities of providing access to the Australian Curriculum for all students, including students with extensive needs, a way forward was identified. This involved the three-dimensional curriculum framework, comprising Learning Area Content, General Capabilities, and Cross-Curriculum Priorities (see Figure 1). Differing states and territories have adopted this framework to meet the needs of their schools, teachers and students. It is the professional responsibility of the teacher to design a classroom program to meet the needs of their students. The model developed by ACARA emphasized that through shifting the balance between the different components, teachers are able to build flexibility into their class programs.
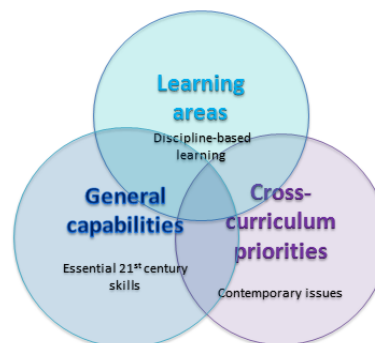

Figure 1. Australian Curriculum three-dimensional design provides flexibility in planning to meet student need.

A foundational assumption to this approach is that all students have the right to access the same curriculum standards. In the Australian context, this right is captured in the Disability Standards for Education 2005, where students with disability have the right to participate in learning experience of a "…program, on the same basis as students without disabilities…" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005, Section 6.2(1)).

To ensure students with extensive needs access the Australian Curriculum on the same basis as their peers, it was proposed that teachers commence planning from the content that matches the student's chronological age. Based on a student's current level of achievement teachers may consider a series of adjustments (i.e., action taken to ensure a student can participate on the same basis as peers without

disability). This may include using content from another level (i.e., higher or lower), using the General Capabilities and/or Cross-Curriculum Priorities to "adjust the learning focus of the age-equivalent learning area content" (ACARA, 2015a, para 3), or linking individualized learning goals with age-appropriate content.

This flexible curriculum design allows teachers to address students' individual learning needs, while maintaining a learning program that is engaging, meaningful, respectful and personalized. This enables equity of access to the Australian Curriculum for all students and promotes excellence.

The General Capabilities of Literacy, Numeracy and Personal and Social Capability were specifically targeted for further development to ensure the curriculum was inclusive of all learners.

Writing a Curriculum Containing UDL.

During the writing phase of the Australian Curriculum, teams of writers work collaboratively with ACARA curriculum staff and are supported by expert advisory groups, including an advisory group for students with disability (ACARA, 2012b, p.14-15). "The curriculum writing process will involve advice and review of documents by advisory group members with expertise on inclusivity to ensure the appropriateness of curriculum content and expectations of achievement. (ACARA, 2013, p. 13)

Writers were briefed as part of their induction on the principles of UDL and how these could be applied to the way they worded content. Inclusivity checks were carried out at seven key points throughout the development of each subject (ACARA, 2012b). The intention was to remove barriers to learning and ensure enough flexibility to "…accommodate the reality of student, teacher and school diversity" (ACARA, 2012b, p. 8)

Curriculum Implementation.

In Australia, implementation of the national curriculum and the development of support materials is the responsibility of the education authorities in each state and territory. However, ACARA did develop advice materials to support this new and flexible concept of using the three-dimensional curriculum design to address student diversity. The advice centers around a process (flowchart) that guides teachers in using the flexible curriculum design to plan rigorous teaching and learning programs that will challenge and engage all students.

The following (http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/ Illustrations/Metadata/IOPL00005, ACARA, 2015c) illustrates the experience of one special school implementing the Australian Curriculum. The example provides evidence of how teachers have used the Australian Curriculum flexibly to plan for their students; further, it provides evidence of how the teacher's implemented instructional practices that uphold the principles of UDL.

CONCLUSION

The design of the Australian Curriculum was key to ensure that all students in Australian schools could access an education program that prepared them to be life-long learners. "The goal of education has shifted from knowledge acquisition to learner expertise. Becoming an expert learner is a process, not a fixed goal." (Meyer, 2014, p.5). The use of the principles of UDL has assisted in structuring a curriculum framework that ensures, "All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens." (MCEETYA, 2008).

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