

Getting Personal with UDL: A personalized approach to teacher development

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Abstract

Given the current educational climate, new initiatives can be about as popular as the flu at a family gathering. Even with the best of intentions and preparation, systemic changes are often met with uncertainty, skepticism, and sometimes, cynicism. Those charged with putting what may seem as even more responsibilities and expectations on the already overflowing plates of educators have an obligation to ensure new learning and efforts to support implementation are relevant and effective, both immediately and across time. This session will examine one county's approach to generating interest in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and supporting implementation and scale-up at multiple levels, by putting teachers back in the driver's seat of their own professional learning.

Keywords

UDL; Implementation; Coaching; Systems change

BACKGROUND

Located in Muskegon, Michigan, the Muskegon Area Intermediate School District (MAISD) serves 12 public school districts and a handful of private and charter schools across Muskegon County. The MAISD employs approximately 25-30 special and general education consultants, whose role it is to support improvement in local districts through professional development, coaching and consultation.

During the 2014-15 school year, general and special education consultants and administrators from the MAISD engaged in learning around the UDL Guidelines and explored connections with existing initiatives across the county. Based on interest and capacity, a sub-group of 8-10 consultants formed the MAISD UDL Leadership Team. Through research on current models of professional development, exploration of successful models of UDL implementation, as well as prior experience with county districts, administrators and teachers, the Leadership Team worked to develop plans for engaging teachers and administrators in learning around UDL. In order to meet the needs of teachers not only from a variety of grade levels and content areas, but also from one of six participating districts, professional development (PD) around UDL was designed in a way which recognized and valued the knowledge, talents and needs of each teacher, while acknowledging and respecting the vision, priorities and culture inherent in each of their buildings and districts.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR SUCCESS

Many in the field of education have drawn connections between UDL and Personalized Learning. Commonalities shared by these methodologies include flexible learning environments, student-centered and relevant goals, and multiple paths and supports to reach those goals, including frequent and timely self-reflection and feedback. (Education Week, 2014) Taking into consideration that these are considered to be effective practices for empowering and improving student learning, how might they relate to teacher learning? Recent research efforts to uncover effective practices for large scale professional development indicate that "teacher development appears to be a highly individualized process". (*The New Teacher Project, 2015*) While unsuccessful in identifying specific PD strategies, researchers have been able to identify ideal conditions school systems can establish to support teacher growth. Some of these conditions include:

Focusing on opportunities to extend the reach of great teachers,

Supporting teachers in developing a clear, deep understanding of their own performance (strengths and weaknesses) in order to improve instruction, and

Providing opportunities for teacher participants to evaluate the effectiveness of professional learning activities within a project.

The following information provides an overview of the intentional integration of these strategies by the MAISD UDL Leadership Team into PD experiences designed with UDL and personalization in mind, in order to meet the needs of a diverse group of educators.

Extend the Reach of Great Teachers

The foundation of implementation efforts of this project has been built largely on the following understandings:

We can't make UDL just one more educational initiative.

We know teachers who embody the thinking and philosophy of UDL, but may never have heard of it.

Given the premises above, along with the goal of aligning to research-based PD practices, personal invitations were extended to a small group (12) of teacher leaders of a variety of grade levels and content areas across 6 districts within the county to participate in a UDL demonstration project during the 2015-16 school year. Teacher leaders were identified as early innovators who embraced the philosophy of

UDL, held high learning expectations for all students, and demonstrated many of the practices and strategies found within the guidelines. In addition, two administrator leaders were invited to participate, including an upper elementary and a high school principal. Including teacher leaders from a variety of grade levels, content areas, buildings and districts afforded the opportunity to spark interest and connections across a broad network of educators and district initiatives. In addition, invitees were seen as possessing the capability to build interest and capacity within their building or district.

Support Deep Understanding

Popularity of instructional coaching has grown in recent years as an integral component for supporting teacher growth and implementation of new learning, strategies and resources. (Cornett & Knight, 2009; Costa & Garmston, 2002) Appreciating the richness of UDL as a mindset, rather than a group of strategies, use of a coaching model to support growth towards that mindset was of critical importance to the project. Throughout implementation efforts, consultants worked closely with teachers and administrators, using coaching practices to support teachers in moving from UDL as a “checklist” to more reflective, intentional integration of the guidelines into regular instructional design and delivery.

Opportunities for reflection and self-assessment occurred routinely throughout the project, beginning with a team-developed self-assessment survey completed during the first PD session, with subsequent follow up surveys to support teachers’ efforts to monitor progress. (see Figure 1) These surveys, along with a UDL reflection tool, were used by participants to set personal goals for learning and implementation.

What statement best describes your current progress towards use of the following strategies you selected to support increased effort and persistence in your students? *

	I have not yet used, or intentionally increased use of this strategy	Column 2	I have made some efforts to increase use of this strategy	Column 4	I regularly apply this strategy to support my selected goal area
Ensure the division of long-term goals into short-term objectives	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Differentiate the degree of difficulty or complexity within which core activities can be completed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Provide alternative choices to permissible tools and scaffolds.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Provide opportunities for collaboration	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 1. Sample personal reflection survey question

In addition to self-reflection and goal setting, consultants partnered with a group of 3-4 teachers throughout the project, completing scheduled classroom visits and collecting

evidence of growth toward teacher-developed goals. Observations were followed by a conversation, providing time for teacher reflection and self-assessment, as well as opportunities to guide goal setting and strategy development. The structure of these observations and reflective conversations was carefully crafted to be non-evaluative. Consultants offered objective evidence of implementation observed during the visit and used a conversation map to help teachers reflect on the lesson and clarify their thinking and planning.

Opportunities for Teachers to Provide Feedback

As teachers engage in individual goal setting and strategy development, it’s crucial to provide access to meaningful activities and resources to support their success. In order to ensure learning and coaching activities provided within the project met the diverse needs of the group, teachers were asked to complete a survey at the beginning, middle and end of the first year of the project. Within the surveys, teachers were asked to reflect on learning activities and resources provided. Participants used a Likert-scale response to evaluate the effectiveness of each category of resource or activity in supporting (or failing to support) their learning and implementation of the UDL guidelines. (see Figure 2) Feedback provided was used to inform planning of the learning activities, content and resources offered during each PD session.

Please rank the following activities and resources as they relate to growth in your understanding and application of UDL principles.

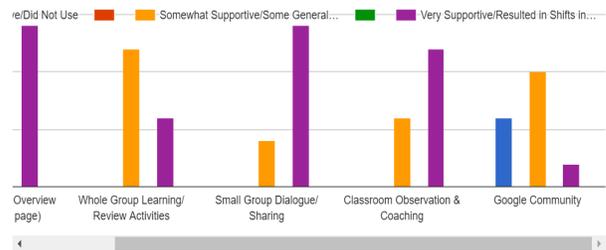


Figure 2. Sample feedback survey question and response

In addition to the surveys, individual planning conversations were held with each participant at the end of the 2015-16 school year. During conversations, participants had the opportunity to provide feedback that was critical to informing future partnerships and activities to support deeper understanding and implementation and plan for scale-up within their building or district.

SUMMARY & UPDATES

Much like the students they support, the learning needs of teachers include many margins with high degrees of variability. Creating effective professional learning experiences requires intentionality on the part of facilitators to ensure teachers have a voice in setting goals and designing experi-

ences to ensure they are attainable. Feedback collected through surveys and interviews at the end of the first year of our project indicate that learning occurred, successes were achieved, and, overall, it was a positive experience for teachers and administrators involved. It also illuminated improvements to be made in order to better support learning, implementation and scale-up. Perhaps the best piece of feedback was the decision for all but one of the participants not only to continue with a second year of learning and implementation, but also to invite one or more colleagues to join the learning conversation, turning a ripple into a wave. As we approach the end of the second year of the project, our own learning has grown exponentially and the need to diversify our support has increased. Plans for 2017-18 include options for inviting new teachers for introduction and exploration of UDL, supporting classroom-level scale-up through continued coaching and adding opportunities for peer-to-peer observations, and supporting teacher leaders in leading PD and coaching around UDL within their own building or district.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend gratitude and appreciation to both administration and colleagues at the MAISD for all of their support, coaching and collaboration around UDL learning and implementation. Also, on behalf of the MAISD UDL Leadership Team, we are grateful to, and humbled by the talents, dedication and persistence of teachers and administrators who took the chance of embarking on this journey with us. Your efforts towards creating a culture of learning which honors, believes in, and supports all students, not only in your own classrooms, but beyond, is a testament to that which is great in education.

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