

#UDLrockstars and the Culture of Sharing

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Abstract

UDL has an image problem. We're still not very good at explaining and inspiring those outside of our immediate UDL circles. How do we spread the UDL message effectively while addressing misconceptions and allowing the framework to evolve as we learn? #UDLrockstars do this daily, and we need to be rockstars, too. Find out what makes #UDLrockstars so effective, how to do what they do, and why more #UDLrockstars are essential to the UDL movement.

Keywords

Professional learning network (PLN); Community of practice (COP); Implementation support; Social media

BACKGROUND

UDL has an image problem. We're at a point where more people have heard of UDL than actually know what it is. Sure, we have the definition and endorsement of UDL in the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008), several references in the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), and even a strong shout-out in the National Education Technology Plan (2016). But as exciting as all of that is, it's also incredibly dangerous. Consider what happens when legislation is misinterpreted as an unfunded mandate. Angry backlash can result. Suddenly, a well-researched framework becomes politicized and eventually consigned to the wasteland of failed education initiatives.

Now, we know that UDL is more than an education initiative. We know that the UDL framework and principles are based on solid research in the learning sciences. We know that the very nature of UDL makes it difficult to put in a box neatly tied with a bow. We know that products designed with UDL in mind make learning experiences better for everyone. We know that the concept of variability, necessary for effective UDL implementation, is difficult to accept by those who subscribe to the myth of the average learner.

But, they base their beliefs on conjecture. . They grumble about having to add UDL to their lesson plans and syllabi. They slap UDL stickers onto their overstuffed inventory and call it new and improved. They are already starting to politicize UDL, promoting the misconceptions rather than the promise.

So how do we help them know what we know? We need more #UDLrockstars.

WHAT IS A #UDLrockstar?

#UDLrockstars aren't just the superstars of the field. They're the teacher who writes a blog post describing plans to focus on growth mindset during a unit on magnetism and electricity. They're the researcher who posts a quote from a journal article on Facebook and sparks a lively conversation among her followers. They're the pre-service teacher who hops onto Twitter every first and third Wednesday to chat with other educators who inspire him to plan for learner variability before he sets foot in his first classroom. In our work it's easy to become isolated as we focus on our professional growth in UDL, or become so entrenched in our research that we forget to continually disseminate our questions and ideas. #UDLrockstars understand the importance of making UDL connections with people and considering other ideas at every opportunity, embodying the principles of UDL through the culture of sharing.

WHAT IS THE CULTURE OF SHARING?

The world is changing in how we communicate big ideas, wrestle with complex notions, and discuss ideas with others. It's rare that an educator has time (or money) to access a peer-reviewed journal, let alone interpret the articles and pull out best practices for her learning environment. Social media, on the other hand, offers immediacy and is freely available. It's easy to consume. It gives us unprecedented access to experts who ten years ago were available by appointment only.

As academics and researchers, we can write all the white papers and journal articles we want, and those still have their place in the culture of sharing, especially when it comes to legitimizing and growing the field of UDL. But we also need to be givers. We need to share experiences, and ask questions freely as we shape the field. We need to invite others into our discussions. And right now, the tool we need to use is social media.

If we want UDL to spread to every corner of the education world and beyond, if we want it to be the education reform movement and positive disruption that education needs, we need to open ourselves up to the world at large, let them help us shape our message, help us curate our resources, help us spread the values of social justice and equity that UDL fosters.

CONCLUSION

We need to become #UDLrockstars, each in our own way, if we're going to prevent UDL from becoming a one-hit wonder. We need to amplify clear, concise UDL messages,

and embrace the soft edges. We need to communicate through multiple channels, and counter the misconceptions. We need to be fearless in sharing our imperfect journeys and compassionate with those who don't yet understand the transformative power of UDL. We need to humanize our message and recognize that the world is our classroom of learners and our goal is for them to share the stage with us as #UDLRockstars.

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