

Implementing UDL When No One's Watching

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Abstract

Is it possible to implement an instructional practice without administrative oversight? How do you share your story with others to improve instruction and student learning? When working with at-risk and adjudicated students, Angelina and Melissa Kreger sought evidence to support their instructional philosophy and, in the process, found the language of Universal Design for Learning. Although colleagues were unaware that they were intentionally designing their classrooms, they found increased student learning supported by state-wide assessment data. Later, when these gains were replicated with high-achieving students, they became convinced that they needed to share their practices with others. Much to their surprise, they could not gain the interest of all stakeholders. This forced them to start evaluating how to implement UDL when no one is watching.

INTRODUCTION

All beginning teachers have an idealized version of their classroom in their head. When Melissa and Angelina began teaching at Charlotte Forten Academy (CFA) in Detroit, Michigan, they couldn't imagine the myriad of opportunities and challenges that came with their positions.

UNKNOWNLY IMPLEMENTING UDL

The demographics of CFA necessitated an instructional shift away from the idealized vision constructed during student teaching into the reality of Melissa's English and Angelina's social studies classrooms. Charlotte Forten was a program that served abandoned, abused, and adjudicated students. This alternative school serviced students expelled from Detroit Public Schools. Classrooms were comprised of students of various skill and age ranges, segregated by gender. In serving this community, the challenge became meeting the needs of all students given significant institutional uncertainty. It was after much trial and error and, frankly, soul-searching, that Melissa and Angelina realized that the traditional "sit and get" approach to secondary academics would not suffice. This compelled them to adopt a curriculum based on rigorous goals where predetermined evidence of learning was made explicit to students. By empowering learners, Melissa and Angelina made instructional decisions that aligned with a well-researched body of literature. In the end, intuition compelled them to move forward in their quest to support all learners.

NAMING UDL ALLOWS FOR SPECIFICITY

When Charlotte Forten Academy closed for not meeting annual yearly progress, Melissa and Angelina were provided the opportunity to test their ideas in new educational

settings. They moved on to teach in different districts; Melissa to a school servicing predominately English-language learners located in Detroit, and Angelina to an affluent suburban district, Novi Public Schools, serving a culturally diverse student body. It was during this period they realized the true power of student choice and voice in their curriculum. After being handed materials to teach students and finding, much like their previous experiences, that there was a lack of student engagement in learning, they employed techniques developed in their previous assignments. A significant shift in their instruction occurred, having discovered Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Armed with research and practical experience from previous teaching assignments, they conferred with their colleagues. But they were met with opposition. They realized that they were asking colleagues to change their fundamental assumptions about teaching. They knew such dramatic change would take time to evolve, bolstered by evidence of student achievement, and testimonials from various stakeholders. It was this spark that ignited a passion in Melissa and Angelina to learn and grow as learning designers in order to create spaces where all students can find success.

MORE SHIFTS, NEW FACES, SAME STORY

Angelina moved from teaching middle school to a classroom at Novi High School, where Melissa earned a position as well. They collaborated, hoping colleagues and administrators would begin to notice and inquire about their teaching practices. This was not the case. Their class rosters were consistently filled with students that had individualized learning needs. They began to hear students mention that their classes were "different." From 2007 through 2015, Melissa and Angelina tirelessly planned curriculum, instruction, and assessment activities that attended to student needs while advancing learning. Throughout this time, they were evaluated by administrators who echoed positive student sentiments. After implementing UDL when no one was watching, they decided to branch out locally in order to connect with other UDL advocates.

STOMP YOUR FEET UNTIL SOMEONE LISTENS

Teachers at the high school began to ask questions about Melissa and Angelina's instructional practice beginning in 2014. By this time, they became active at the county-level, attending UDL professional learning sessions and voraciously reading research and materials to enhance their classroom experience. As they presented assessment results, designed common materials with peers, and spoke with parents, it was clear that the time had come to articulate their methods. Melissa and Angelina decided to present

at a local conference, talking about how they grew UDL from the ground up, attracting the attention the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction for Novi Schools. Melissa and Angelina presented at numerous Michigan conferences in 2016, and conducted professional development with their colleagues. Inspired, some of their colleagues began to seek out information on their own, slowly changing their fundamental assumptions about teaching.

SMALL OPPORTUNITIES HAVE BIG PAYOFFS

The generosity and expertise of Oakland Schools staff, the local intermediate school district, helped propel the message of Universal Design for Learning forward in Novi. UDL consultant Bryan Dean, in collaboration with Laura Cummings, designated Melissa and Angelina UDL Practitioners in Residence for Oakland County in 2016, and Angelina became an instructional coach at Novi Middle School, compelling the administration in Novi to consider how Universal Design for Learning could be implemented in the district. With a willing administrative team and interested staff, a plan for professional learning around Universal Design is currently being developed at the middle school. After implementing UDL when no one was watching, Melissa and Angelina are now engaged in conversations with colleagues, making incremental changes at the high school, and supporting the administration as they take steps to implement full-scale professional learning around universally designed instructional practices. This collaboration is helping to revamp and reinvigorate learning in Novi.

CONCLUSION

One never knows when an unexpected event will change your life. Similarly, no one can predict a shift in their thinking. Melissa and Angelina learned over a period of ten years that change is slow, but persistence offers its own rewards. To imply that the entire district was implementing the framework for Universal Design for Learning would be an overstatement. But teachers are beginning to have the conversation, asking questions, challenging assumptions. Teachers are starting to draw the same conclusions that Melissa and Angelina did as the demographics and curriculum of the district change, necessitating a shift in instructional design. The conclusion that can be drawn is that even when one is implementing UDL when no one is watching, it will support student learning by changing the very fabric of who they are as learners, and reinvigorate ones passion for the craft of teaching.

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