

Inquire, Investigate, Innovate:

UDL at the Intersection of School Improvement Goals

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Abstract

This paper will explore how the P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School is increasing the school's capacity to respond to learner variability through new teacher induction, practitioner research, and professional opportunities that blur traditional beliefs about professional learning in schools. Participants will engage in collaborative discussions about UDL implementation.

Keywords

Implementation, Practitioner Research, Professional Learning, Continuous Improvement

INTRODUCTION

P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School is one of four laboratory schools (DRS) affiliated with Colleges of Education in Florida. As the DRS at the University of Florida, P.K. Yonge seeks to engage in the work of public education for and with Florida's students, testing and disseminating best practice through ongoing school improvement efforts. During the last three years, P.K. Yonge has placed an intentional focus on Universal Design for Learning as the framework through which educators might view the intersection of improvement efforts. Rather than positioning UDL implementation as one of several ongoing initiatives underway within the school context, the Universal Design for Learning framework and language supporting learner variability are positioned to be the lens through which educators at P.K. Yonge view practice.

BACKGROUND

P.K. Yonge has a strong tradition of providing professional learning for teachers through job-embedded Teacher Inquiry and professional outreach from our classrooms. During the summer months, P.K. Yonge faculty engage in intensive summer institutes and course development work (i.e., *Waves of Innovation*) which are often directly connected to the cycles of Practitioner Research or Teacher Inquiry that occur during the school year. These iterative cycles of collaborative professional learning followed by Teacher Inquiry, leading to outreach from the classroom, are the way in which professional learning time and resources are invested.

P.K. Yonge's UDL implementation journey began in summer, 2013 with a strategic decision to reframe an existing professional learning course development opportunity (i.e.,

Waves of Innovation) with the principles and guidelines of Universal Design for Learning central to the design process. Teachers were given the opportunity to redesign existing courses, curricula, and learning environments following an intensive introduction to UDL. Along with the Waves of Innovation opportunity beginning in 2013, an optional *Summer Institute* was made available for K-12 faculty members to learn more about a Universal Design for Learning approach to planning for instruction. The UDL implementation journey continues and three years later UDL is at the intersection of improvement goals as the framework that guides educator thinking about how to plan instruction for and respond to the needs of learners.

UDL AT THE INTERSECTION OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GOALS

In order to ensure the integrity of Universal Design for Learning as a conceptual framework and not as an initiative or strategy, P.K. Yonge DRS began implementation of Universal Design for Learning with a focus on learner variability. Rather than introduce Universal Design for Learning or UDL language into the faculty's professional learning, the focus was placed on the prevalence and predictability of learner variability and the importance of clarity regarding goals in the learning environment. With efforts toward school improvement underway and faculty members actively pursuing professional learning to support improvement efforts, the introduction to Universal Design for Learning must be a compliment or support to those efforts versus a shift in direction or focus.

The Universal Design for Learning framework is embedded into existing professional learning structures in four significant areas of focus. New teacher induction, teacher inquiry or practitioner research, iterative curriculum development (i.e., *Waves of Innovation*), and intensive summer institutes. These four professional learning structures support continuous improvement in classrooms and provide the basis for P.K. Yonge's outreach program which provides professional learning to over 300 educators annually from schools and districts both nationally and internationally.

During monthly collaborative professional learning sessions, teachers working in their first three years of professional service or in their first year at P.K. Yonge (regardless of years in the profession), meet together to examine questions of practice, share current dilemmas, and learn with and from veteran teachers in order to increase their

success in the classroom. The UDL framework is now a central focus of this learning time. P.K. Yonge is asking new teachers to consider the principles, guidelines, and checkpoints as they explore instructional dilemmas and consider ways in which UDL can help eliminate barriers in curriculum and environments that impede student success.

Teachers at P.K. Yonge engage in self-inquiry in annual cycles in order to continue to examine and improve instructional practice. The individual concerns, questions and passions of teachers often emerge from such inquiry. Rather than directing teachers to frame their questions around UDL, P.K. Yonge is continuously examining where teachers' questions intersect with the UDL framework.

Unique in the K-12 context is a pathway for professional learning that positions practicing teachers to submit annual proposals for curriculum development and instructional design. These proposals are structured as internal grants (teachers are compensated for the development work) and require teachers to consider particular design questions and focus on areas in need of development based on students' needs. The development is designed to be iterative and

support teachers in taking a "next step" in implementing principles and guidelines of Universal Design for Learning. Weaving key design questions related to Universal Design for Learning into this proposal allows UDL to intersect with work underway and helps teachers to see the relationship between UDL and instructional design.

Summer Institutes and *Research In Action* outreach events at P.K. Yonge blur the lines between engaging in professional learning and providing professional learning for other educators. The outreach mission at P.K. Yonge follows the inquiry and innovation of the practicing teachers. As principles of Universal Design for Learning continue to develop in P.K. Yonge classrooms, outreach events in the form of *Summer Institutes*, where faculty learn alongside educators from other schools and *Research In Action*, where classrooms at P.K. Yonge become the learning environment for visiting educators, will continue to focus on UDL implementation.

It is through these structures that P.K. Yonge positions Universal Design for Learning at the intersection of school improvement.