

# Five Countries, One Goal: Integrating Cultural Responsiveness and UDL

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## Abstract

*Diversity in the classroom impacts educators across the globe. Partners, led by a support service in Brussels, Belgium, agreed to a three year project titled Use Diversity to Enhance Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (UDEL 21). This project brings together a consortium of K-12 educators, service providers for schools and university educators from Austria, Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Czech Republic, Italy and Slovenia. Together, they are establishing an overall common frame of reference on diversity and are using the UDL framework to guide the development of tools (e.g., class activities, narratives and file cards). All tools are written down in an accessible and simple template and the procedures are based on the UDL guidelines. The partnership also provides national and international in-service trainings. This paper provides an overview of the project, its outcomes, and the UDL training provided to the project partners to enhance their use of the framework in the design of their tools.*

## Keywords

Diversity fields, tools for the classroom.

## INTRODUCTION

In response to the diversity teachers are facing in their classrooms, Pedagogische Begeleidingsdienst van het Katholiek Onderwijs, an organization in Brussels, Belgium, that supports public Catholic schools partnered with five additional organizations from Austria, Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Czech Republic, Italy, and Slovenia. Using the *why, what, and how* associated with universal design for learning (UDL), the project goal was to guide teachers in their use of student diversity in their classrooms to prepare all students for a diverse society (the why), by developing tools (the what), and developing these tools using the UDL framework (the how).

In 2015, through a project titled Use Diversity to Enhance Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (UDEL 21), a team of fifteen professionals came together in with the goal of three outcomes: (1) a Common Frame of Reference to define diversity, (2) in-service training modules, and (3) local, regional, and international in-service trainings (UDEL 21, n.d.). These three outcomes continue to evolve as the project moves toward its August 31, 2018 completion date and are discussed below. This paper concludes with a description of the training about UDL provided to the partners.

## THE COMMON FRAME OF REFERENCE

Because this project is spread across five countries and there is further variability in how diversity is considered and addressed within each country, the partners determined that a document defining their interpretation of diversity was needed. This document will communicate how the UDEL 21 partners not only define diversity but why diversity needs to be addressed within schools. Prior to publishing the document, schools will have the opportunity to provide feedback.

To date, UDEL 21 partners have utilized research from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) which recognizes diversity in education as a challenge schools will face over the next decade. They also are finding that a common legal base is emerging across Europe that ensures inclusive education, equal rights, and the elimination of discrimination in educational settings. Finally, diversity is discussed across the literature of different nations, a comparison that fosters the examination and discussion of issues around diversity. For example, countries are looking to one another's data and experiences to discover solutions and supports. They are using this information to establish a definition and to demonstrate that practices in the classroom will not change without a mindset shift (UDEL21, n.d.).

## Diversity

Because the Common Frame of Reference is the guiding document for the work related to this project, the UDEL 21 partners continue to work toward a definition of diversity. The final definition will address the different aspects and dimensions of diversity including social background, multi-lingualism, cultural diversity, learning and teaching variability, physical and cognitive needs, as well as gender issues.

## Mindset

The UDEL 21 partners believe diversity is not a problem or a "state of weakness;" instead, they believe diversity is a resource and strength that can lead to improved learning (UDEL 21, n.d.). This conclusion is driven by current literature and policies from their countries. Universal statements from across this literature include:

- Every child has an equal right to education.
- Every child is able to learn.
- Each pupil should participate in choosing learning

methods and goals.

- Each pupil has the right to be different.
- Each pupil should be recognized and respected as an equal partner in their school communities choices and processes of active learning.
- Teachers should provide successful learning experiences to every child; and
- Teachers should design to meet the learning needs of children (UDEl 21, n.d.).

To allow for these statements, some teachers will have to experience a shift in mindset. To assist in that shift, project partners are creating classroom tools that emphasize diversity as an asset when teaching about the value of diversity in society. This project also aims to design effective in-service training for teachers in their use of these tools. Both the tools and the training are designed with the use of the UDL framework.

### IN-SERVICE TRAINING MODULES

While the project includes the creation of different tools, modules are produced to guide teachers in their use of a specific tool, the template (see Image 1).

**Image 1: Fillable template**

### The Template

The information below describes each section of the template.

- **Field of diversity:** the designer selects the icon(s) that match the lesson and deletes the non-related icons. The icons represent gender issues, language, learning variability, multiculturalism.
- **Group size:** The designer selects the icon that matches the lesson and deletes the non-related icons. The icons represent single learner, a pair of learners, a small group, a large group, or a full school.
- **Title:** The title of the activity or lesson.
- **Content:** A brief description of the activity or lesson and the purpose of the lesson.

- **Time:** The amount of time that should be given to the activity or lesson.
- **Goals (skills/competencies):** What skills or competencies the students should gain. Goals should be written to allow for flexible materials and methods.
- **Materials:** The materials suggested for the activity or lesson.
- **Procedure:** A brief outline of the activity or lesson.
- **Modifications/comments:** Once teachers have implemented the activity or lesson, they put their modifications or comments in this box.
- **Success factors:** The teacher lists the factors that led to the successful implementation of this activity.
- **Pitfalls:** The teacher lists the factors that led to the pitfalls associated with this activity or lesson.

The UDEl 21 partners have developed an organizational design that (a) incorporated the UDL framework, and (b) allowed them to design lessons that address any area of diversity. The intent of the template is the provide teachers with ideas and guidance on activities or mini-lessons focused on diversity. The objective is for teachers to also use the UDL framework when designing the activity or mini-lesson for their own environment. To date, the partners have met the project goal of designing 72 activity/mini lesson templates. Image 2 provides an example of a completed template.

**Image 2: Completed template**

A module, which provides guidance on how to use and implement the template, is completed for each set of tools. These are called modules to emphasize the architectural sense of the term - the templates can be used separately or several can be used together at the user's discretion.

Tools include:

- The development of sample lessons that show how to use student diversity to increase student understanding of diversity and its strengths;

- Narratives describing the design of positive, diversity-centered classroom experiences, and;
- File cards.

## **Other Unique Features**

### *The Lessons*

For some of the partner organizations, the templates act as lesson plans to be used by classroom teachers while other partner organizations utilize additional narratives and file cards (see below) to provide additional guidance to the teachers.

### *The Narratives*

Each narrative is a 2-page document that shares helpful practices via a story of how diversity is an empowering and positive aspect of a classroom.

### *The File Cards*

File cards display brief descriptions of a topic to support teachers in their implementation of that topic. File cards incorporate images along with text to support deeper understanding.

## **IN-SERVICE TRAINING**

Known as the “professionalization of teachers,” this is work done at the local, regional, and international levels. The local and regional sessions can include topics like UDL, evaluation, supporting the community, or other topics that the school's request. Each training topic links back to the Common Frame of Reference.

The international in-service trainings will include topics such as co-teaching and communities of practice. The topics will be decided upon based on local need. In each case, an initial course will be offered and then revised based on the feedback. The plan for that course will later become one of the tools available to anyone interested.

## **UDL TRAINING**

To empower the UDEL 21 partners in their use of UDL as the design framework for their tools, they participated in a five-day training in September of 2016. The attendees were provided with base information about the framework, given the opportunity to dig more deeply into the guidelines, and used that knowledge to do their own crosswalk of the UDL guidelines with the principles of culturally responsive teaching as defined by Brown University (2017). The partners then transferred this knowledge to the content of the Common Frame of Reference, the design of the templates, and considering the modules all with UDL in mind.

## **CONCLUSION**

UDEL 21 is a cutting-edge project for European agencies and schools. It has brought together colleagues from five countries who experience different cultures and understand the variety of cultures within their own countries. These individuals are establishing a Common Frame of Reference to guide how they address and help educators plan for diversity. Further, through their growing knowledge of UDL, they are using that framework to ensure flexibility and accessibility are inherent within each tool and variability is viewed as an asset.

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