Leading UDL Implementation with Professional Learning Communities

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Abstract

This paper will describe the rationale and structure for a professional learning community (PLC) to implement UDL. True implementation requires activities that lead to culture change; it is much more than an instructional bag of tricks or a collection of strategies. The implementation process differs across school cultures, and yet, in all cases the PLC model has been the driver of progress for Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS).

Keywords

Professional Learning Community, UDL Implementation.

INTRODUCTION

From fall 2009 to the present, The High Incidence Accessible Technology (HIAT) Team has worked with 24 schools to establish UDL Leadership Teams using a PLC model to seed UDL implementation in the wider school-community. Prior to employing the PLC model, HIAT had several years of experience providing professional development to staff in the area of technology integration and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

The degree of UDL implementation in project schools has varied. Over the past four years, HIAT has developed a process that is flexible yet sufficiently structured to guide schools toward success. HIAT has identified several factors that are predictive of success.

- Administrative support.
- Characteristics of individual PLC members.
- The structure and process used to select the team.
- Time dedicated to the project

KEY COMPONENTS OF THE PLC MODEL

This model depends on the provision of a consultant or team of consultants with the expertise and resources to guide and monitor the PLCs. In Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), the HIAT team was the driver for this implementation model. HIAT staff served as consultants for individual schools. HIAT's model of support evolved over the 3-5 year timeline for each school as outlined:

1. Establishing the UDL Leadership Team

2. Guiding the team's work throughout the course of the first year.

3. Providing a system of supports to foster continued implementation over the next four years.

During the first year of implementation, key elements of the consultant's role include:

- Providing UDL PLC members the opportunity to collaborate with other schools undergoing the same process.

- Providing schools with incentives from grant resources including

  o Stipend money for professional development related to UDL.

  o In some cases, technology resources.

  o Learning opportunities including peer visits in existing UDL schools.

Establishing a UDL Leadership Team

The first step was to identify schools and then a group of individuals within them to serve as the UDL Leadership Team. This team functioned as a PLC rather than a traditional school committee.

A school's level of investment in the project was predictive of the project's success. Rather than responding to a district mandate, schools requested and applied to engage in a UDL project. HIAT used an application process for school selection and subsequently for the PLC member selection. (Please read the DeCoste paper in these proceedings for more information on the preparation phase of UDL Projects.) The number of schools selected was determined by available funds. The most important factors when selecting schools were:

- The desire of the administration to embrace UDL

- The degree to which other initiatives in the school would compete for time needed to implement the UDL project.

Administrators who demonstrated a belief that UDL would support other initiatives and provide a framework to guide educational practice were more likely to be chosen.

The most important characteristic for the selection of the PLC team members was a commitment to learning about UDL in depth as evidenced by:

- A willingness to collaborate with one another.

- The commitment to experiment with UDL implementation in their classrooms.
- The willingness to take risks and share their experiences in order to propel the school forward.

The application was very simple, with one or two open-ended questions to elicit information about the individual's mindset regarding learning and risk-taking. The applications also served to ensure that individuals interested in joining the PLC had read the expectations for participation and were willing to commit to the process. In most cases, the application process was self-selecting. Those who were motivated to complete the application were likely to demonstrate that commitment.

In order to ensure the growth of PLC teams, we found that we needed to provide ample structure without being too directive. We encouraged the teams to quickly take ownership of their own exploration and to view themselves as instigators of school-wide change. Early in the process, differences in school culture and the school's readiness to take ownership of their learning become apparent. The consultant's role was to gauge

- The amount of introductory training on UDL the group needed.
- The need to teach the group to collaborate and work as a team.

One or two face-to-face interactions proved effective to set expectations and coach for success. Typically, we spent the first meeting providing background information on UDL. We learned that in order to understand UDL, a more constructivist model was optimal. We needed to balance the consultant's role as the expert (i.e., someone who can teach and impart information), with the team's need to do the work to create their own understanding of UDL. We asked teams to view UDL as a lens with which to view current practices and variations on these practices. It was important that they not view UDL as simply one more list of strategies.

Our work, then, in the early stages of setting up the PLCs, was to provide information and coaching on how to establish the group's purpose; to support itself internally, commit to deep reflection, and take ownership of the learning process. Usually, one face-to-face meeting was allocated for introductions, team building, explanation of expectations, and providing a vision for the project's outcomes. A second meeting was used to help the members become oriented to the online forums and to model protocols for effective monthly meetings.

At the outset we also realized that it was important to communicate clearly the following key understandings to all team members:

Their knowledge of UDL is sufficient to be a part of this group. There is no information that they should wait to obtain before considering themselves a full member of the UDL PLC team.

- Their work will involve exploration and risk-taking. A constructivist approach to learning is essential to the process.
- The team will be expected to not only deepen their learning, but reflect on how to share that learning with the rest of the staff.
- How UDL impacts teaching practices is a career-long professional journey for all teachers, but creating a change in school culture can and should begin within a one- to two-year timeframe.
- It is the responsibility of the team to create that change.

Guiding the Team's Work in the First Year

A Flexible Timeline
The timeline of tasks for the first year of the UDL project was flexible to the needs of the PLC. Decisions on where to begin and when to move on were customized to each school team.

We provided a structure that articulated expectations and established timelines for the first year. Toward the end of the year, PLC teams were asked to create their own action plan to guide their work going forward. Providing a timeline, but allowing for some flexibility, allowed us to be more responsive to the team's needs.

When a UDL project is supported by sufficient funding, it is possible to begin the school year with a fairly rigorous timeline. Key activities included:

- Consultants met with school principals to initiate the project.
- Consultants met with the PLC team prior to the start of the online forums.
- Consultants met with the PLC team again at the start of the online forums.
- Teams met monthly for at least an hour for the entire school year.
- We provided one training and networking session for the site facilitators within the first month.
- Teams completed activities and reflections as outlined by the online forums.
- Teams participated in a peer visit at another school in the first semester.
- Consultants met with principals and site facilitators at each school toward the end of the first semester to discuss progress and provide an opportunity for the principal to ask questions. At this time, we also began planning for administrators to do walk-through's in the second or third semester.
- Teams hosted a peer visit in the second semester.

- Teams planned and delivered at least one professional development experience for the staff in the first year.
- Teams opened their classrooms for an administrative walk-through at the end of the first year, or beginning of the second year.

The Online Forums

Most of the work by the PLC teams was completed through the structure of online forums. HIAT's online forums are described in the form of a syllabus and approved for three Continuing Professional Development (CPD) credits by the State of Maryland. The status as a CPD course was advantageous in that it provided PLC members recognition for the time commitment and the significant learning which resulted. An alternative would be to provide stipend pay for the same number of hours that the credit-bearing course required. We found it is best to promote the online environment as a collaborative forum of teacher-leaders who are agents of change, rather than communicate the idea that the team members are simply engaged in a professional development opportunity.

The online forums[2] consisted of 15, two week sessions. They typically ran from October through late May. Each session represented three hours of work including:

- Reviewing articles, videos, or learning modules.
- Trying new ideas in the classroom.
- Participating in an online discussion around a single reflection question.

Some sessions centered on sharing a classroom practice with the rest of the group. Some involved reflecting on UDL principles, such as the difference between using technology as an activity or a tool. Other sessions focused on learning something new, such as Inspiration™ software.

The Role of the Consultants

School-based UDL PLC teams relied on outside consultants to implement the project timeline, provide stipend funds for team meetings and to coach and support the site facilitator. When the human resources existed, it was very effective for the consultant to occasionally participate in monthly PLC team meetings, meet periodically with classroom teachers for informal coaching and encouragement. A closer connection with the UDL PLC team helped the consultants make effective recommendations. It also motivated the teams and supported them in developing a sense of competence. Another key role of the consultant was to collect, organize, and disseminate videos and examples of UDL success stories. These stories were then used to share ideas and success between teams. They were also the raw material for district-wide training on UDL that transformed

the UDL principles from theory to replicable classroom practices.

The Walkthrough Process

HIAT developed a process for walk-throughs specific to the needs of this project. The process proved so effective that it could be used for peer visits as well as showcases for administrators and district staff with only minor adjustments. The core of the walk-through was the UDL Look Fors. Unlike the UDL Guidelines (see http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/udlguidelines), which summarize the wider scope of UDL practices, the Look Fors identify specific practices related to UDL that can be observed readily during a ten to fifteen minute classroom visit. In this way, the Look Fors complement a deeper study of the UDL Guidelines by providing teachers with a starting point that results in observable behaviors.

The UDL Look Fors are not quantitative, but specific enough to generate meaningful discussion around UDL. The Look Fors provide value in the following ways:

- They help practitioners to showcase or improve practices consistent with UDL principles.
- They allow peer observers to operationalize some of the UDL concepts which then guide their questions and reflections.
- They allow outside observers to focus their observations on the elements of UDL and how those might compare with other teaching and learning frameworks.

It is important to ground the Look Fors in a process that is positive, reflective, and encourages dialogue. The following outlines the components of a UDL walk-through:

1. Introduction to the Look Fors and expectations for the walkthrough process.
2. Visits to 3 to 5 classrooms for 10 or 15 minutes each.
3. Short reflection and note-taking period.
4. Structured debriefing.

This process can be completed in a morning and works as well for peer visits as it does for more formal *showcase* observations. Only the content of the introduction and debriefing may change to meet different purposes. Scheduling a walkthrough demands time and energy from both the UDL PLC members and the consultant, however it offers a rich learning experience for all participants including the observed teachers. We have found UDL walk-throughs to be the most powerful learning experience of the UDL projects for all stakeholders, including PLC members, administrators, and district office staff.

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[2] The scope and sequence of the online forums is available on the HIAT website at www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/hiat/udl/plc_study_topics.shtm. The forums are currently under revision. The website will be updated when revisions are complete.

Supporting Teams Beyond Year One

There was no specific timeline or list of activities for the second through fifth years. UDL PLCs Teams were encouraged to create an action plan at the end of the first year, and to update that plan as needed in following years. The model of support shifted to the site facilitator. The UDL consultant continued to serve as a coach to the site facilitator in subsequent years. Other support offered by the HIAT team included:

- Consultation with the school administration.
- Attendance at school UDL activities to coach or provide feedback.
- Support with executing the UDL walkthrough process.
- Consultation on technology purchases.

Action Plans

Midway through the first year, UDL Leadership Teams were asked to consider the most effective means for outreach and dissemination of UDL teaching practices within their buildings. Teams were required to create an action plan as the final assignment in the online forums. Action plans were structured to ensure that the team had shifted its focus from personal exploration to sharing practices and mindful school-wide implementation of UDL. Typical components of the action plans included:

- A process for infusing UDL into team collaborative planning processes.
- Commitment to in-house peer visits.
- Embedding UDL messaging in school-wide communications, such as the principal's newsletter.
- Creating opportunities for professional development using expertise within the school building.
- A system of sharing classroom materials electronically.
- A system of sharing classroom practices through video clips and story-telling.

Hosting Events for Other Schools

The consultants asked teams in year two and beyond to serve as models for other schools. Other than the walkthroughs described above, team members were also asked to be interviewed for video clips, co-present in webinars, or present workshops to the wider school district. PLC members were also encouraged to present beyond the district and several UDL PLC staff members have presented at state and national conferences.

Data Collection/Initial Outcomes

The UDL walk-through process generated a large quantity of data. The data collected documented the growth of UDL understandings and changes in practice. The UDL Look Fors provided a snapshot of how much UDL was observed in the classrooms. Surveys gauged changes in teachers' perceptions on their instructional practices. These processes provided a way to measure fidelity of implementation within each school, but not across schools.

We've discovered that there are different entry points to UDL implementation for PLCs. Some teams began by changing their *lens*, examining what they were already doing in keeping with UDL, and learning the vocabulary of UDL. Over time, they incorporated the concepts of universal access and developed a deeper understanding of what UDL adds to the constructs of good teaching. Some schools jumped to technology tools and their application to UDL principles. Starting with technology tools gave these groups an impetus to begin thinking and collaborating. Different entry points have also proven to be equally effective. Currently, the HIAT team is working on creating a checklist of indicators of UDL adoption by a school that could take into account the varied paths toward UDL adoption.

The Office of Shared Accountability in MCPS conducted a preliminary research study to determine whether UDL was being implemented in 48 classrooms, kindergarten through eighth grade, whose teachers had participated through year one of a UDL project. The study also explored whether UDL had a positive impact on student engagement and teacher planning. As part of that study, the Look Fors were used to devise a measurement tool to define the degree to which a teacher used UDL practices during a classroom observation. Preliminary results are encouraging. This study is expected to be published in the coming months.

Tools and Resources

HIAT has developed many tools to guide each activity described in this paper. The Appendix includes those tools that are most critical to understanding the narrative here. The HIAT website houses all of the materials referenced in this paper. Please go to www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/hiat/udl to access these materials.

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