From student teachers to Educators: Walking the Talk with UDL

Introduction

Over the years, I have taught B.Ed students about universal design and the UDL framework. As part of this work, students would plan lessons using the UDL framework and teach them on their school placement. This article will discuss key issues from dialogue and interaction with the students around utilising the UDL framework in their planning and teaching, and more generally, understanding the underlying UDL philosophy. These insights may be of relevance to educators interested in developing and promoting UDL in their own practice.

Explaining UDL to Student Teachers

There are various descriptions of UDL in the literature and this can be confusing. Some argue it is a flexible curriculum. Others call it a checklist. However, it is perhaps best described as a set of tools that educators use in their planning and teaching (Meo, 2008). It can be usefully viewed as a 'process' that facilitates educators to adjust the curriculum in ways that promote access, participation and progress for *all* learners (King Sears, 2009). Importantly, academic standards should *not* be compromised in the process (McGuire, Scott & Shaw, 2006). Rather, educators consider methods of ensuring that all students are supported to become experts in the knowledge, skills, or concepts being taught. This is achieved through reflection on the three dimensions of the UDL framework and choosing the most supportive and helpful options for presenting, teaching, and assessing whatever the topic, concept, or skills involved. The three dimensions of the UDL framework are called principles and each principle contains its own guidelines and further checkpoints within the guidelines which act as prompts for the user. These prompts are examples and are not prescriptive or exhaustive. The three principles involve (1) how to engage students with the topic or concepts being presented, (2) how to present the topic or concepts (3), how students will act on and express what they're learning and show what they've learned (see figure 1 below).

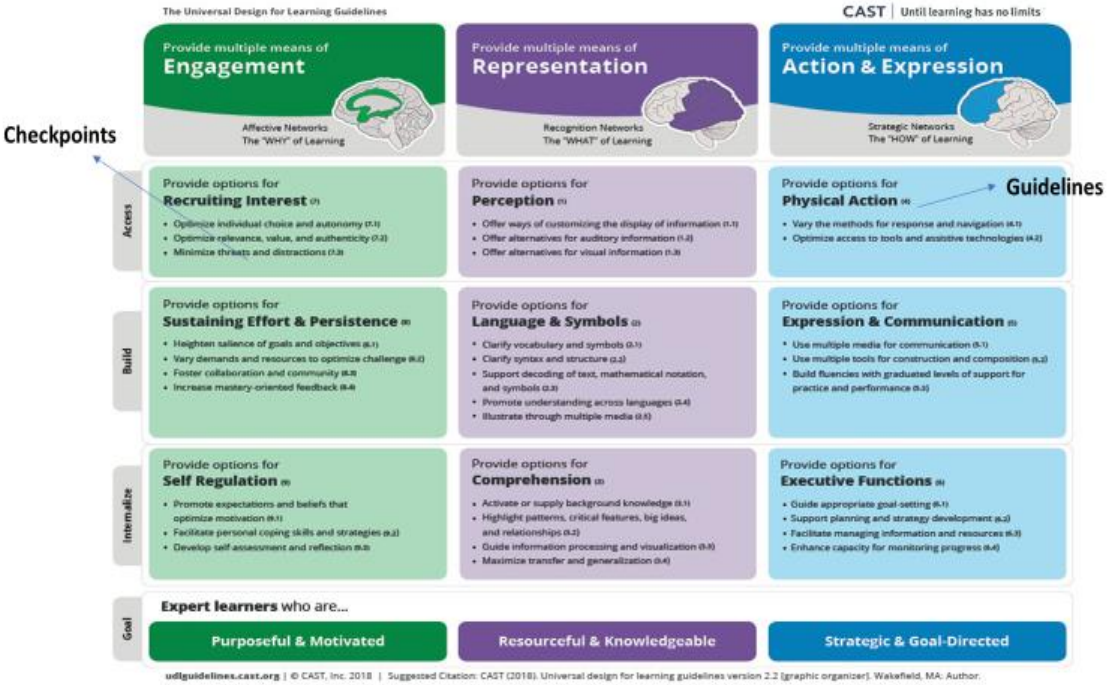

Figure 1 UDL Framework (CAST, 2018).

Navigating the framework

The UDL framework is difficult to understand and navigate. Some students find it confusing and are overwhelmed by all the options. Nelson (2014) refers to the 'unwieldiness of the framework' (p. 19) and suggests that teachers starting to work with the framework should start small. Providing options for assessment can be a popular starting point for educators, but if students haven't been fully motivated and engaged in the learning, and if they haven't been provided with appropriate supports to understand and engage with what is being learned throughout a Semester for example, then the provision of assessment options may be missing the point.

I would suggest that to truly engage with UDL, a better starting point is with the second principle: Representation (middle column) as it directly relates to the educator's presentation of a topic. Here, background knowledge may be tapped, new vocabulary and concepts introduced, modelling can occur and/or preliminary activities or group work can take place. Visual as well as auditory modes can be utilised to explain the concepts being introduced but loitering in the shadow is the need to recruit student interest and attention to what is being presented. Thus, in reflecting on presenting the topic, there is crossover thinking to the first principle concerning student engagement. Furthermore, the provision of video or audio media to introduce or explain an idea can also stimulate students' interest. This demonstrates how the three principles interweave and engage with each other as reflective planning using the UDL framework takes place. After introducing, modelling, discussing examples (Representation), there is a change towards development of student thinking and action through activities which may involve skill development and problem solving around the new topic. This is the transition to reflection on the third principle: student Action and Expression. This principle is about guiding student expression of learning in ways that support learning differences. This can be managed during class through group and pair work and active learning which is helpful. In addition, consideration of alternative options for interaction with knowledge and ideas is important to consider (e.g., options other than through written modes). This applies equally to student learning *outside of lecture time* (e.g., for the following week).

Providing options for learning through different modalities would be especially helpful for students with dyslexia for example, who formed the largest group of students with disabilities (38%) registered with disability support services in 2018-2019 (AHEAD, 2020). This percentage does not account for students with dyslexia who do not seek disability support, and students who have literacy difficulties but no diagnosis of dyslexia. So, the actual percentage of students with some kind of literacy difficulty is probably much larger than 38%. Such students have a slower reading and information processing rate. They need time. The transmission or lecture model doesn't suit these students. That's why it is important to provide lecture slides and notes before a lecture, and of course, this will benefit all students.

Barriers to Learning

One of the arguments of UDL is that assessments lose their authenticity when they assess characteristics of a disability, not the knowledge intended (Hehir, 2005). This argument is again relevant for students with dyslexia and was discussed in light of the 3rd dimension of UDL (Action and Expression). Discussion centred on the example of the invisibility of the learning differences associated with dyslexia especially in large classes, the emphasis on reading and writing as a means to acquiring knowledge and showing learning, the built-in biases involved, and the marginalisation that occurs as a result for students who would achieve academic success through more diverse means of expressing their learning (Gordon, 2009). In large class teaching for example, we are less likely to see or know the barriers to learning among our students. When we can see barriers to

learning (e.g., for students who are wheelchair users, students who are blind or have visual difficulties, or those who are deaf and hard of hearing), the supports needed are easier to identify and accommodate. However, for hidden learning differences the provision of options/choices (e.g., checkpoints) provided in the UDL framework increases flexibility in teaching, learning, and assessment, and helps remove barriers to learning for *all* students.

This point can be difficult to convey. UDL is *not* a tool to meet the needs of students with disabilities (Coyne et al., 2011; Hall, Meyer & Rose, 2011). It represents a paradigm shift in how we look at learner differences. It emphasises adapting the curriculum to suit all learners rather than learners having to adapt to the curriculum (Minow, 2009). Therefore, UDL is *not* about making adjustments to a 'one size fits all curriculum' (or plan of teaching) with the embellishment of differentiation or special accommodations. This is not to say that accommodations will not be needed. Accommodations will be a necessity *in some circumstances e.g., laptop magnifiers, sign-language interpreters*. In fact, Ron Mace, the architect founder of UD and a wheelchair user noted "*nothing can be truly universal. There will always be people who cannot use an item no matter how thoughtfully it is designed. However, we can always improve on the things we design to make them more universally usable"* (cited in McGuire et al., 2006, p. 172). In this sense, UDL is a process rather than an achievement, but it should cater for all students to the greatest extent possible, and where there appears to be little diversity and disability among students, it may be helpful to think about hidden differences among students.

When is it UDL?

There is no operational definition of UDL (Basham & Gardner, 2010), and therefore no strict rules as to how many guidelines or checkpoints are sufficient to guarantee adherence to UDL. Arguably, this is one of the weaknesses of UDL as it allows the provision of any option or choice for students to be termed 'UDL'. However, there is a growing urgency among scholars around this question considering the argument that UDL is not truly researchable without a definition or criteria (Edyburn, 2010). What I recommend for B.Ed students as satisfying UDL, is proactive use of at least one guideline from all three dimensions of the framework in their planning and teaching. Additionally, they must justify their use of guidelines and checkpoints in terms of the pupils they are teaching, as including arbitrary guidelines from the three dimensions is not necessarily UDL.

UDL Philosophy

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of UDL for B.Ed students is fostering understanding of the underpinning theories associated with UDL. UDL aligns itself theoretically and philosophically with the social model of disabilities (Gallagher, 2015; Liasidou, 2015). It is envisaged as a means to move from the individual medical model where disability is positioned in terms of individual deficit and pathology, to a model that emphasises the barriers that impose limitations on individuals (Barton 2001; Oliver, 2013). When Rose & Meyer (2002) speak of the disabling environment and curriculum rather than the learner being disabled, and when removal of "barriers to learning" in the environment and curriculum is paramount to UDL, the message is clear. Educators are being prompted to recognise the reproduction of power and privilege within the education system. This shift in thinking can be difficult for those who have thrived and benefited in a meritocratic system of education where social capital is prioritised and rewarded.

Promoting inclusion?

Central to the above discussion is the idea of an equitable and socially-just education. While some scholars propose that UDL promotes inclusion, I am not sure that the endless circularity of the

inclusion project fits well with the philosophy of UDL. Inclusion assumes that the 'excluded' need to be brought into the warm patronising heart of the 'normal' environment and accommodated therein. UDL is about moving out of the educational comfort zone with a provocative push towards an unfamiliar space of diversity that challenges the idealisation of the norm and offers support for all learning differences without the accompanying stigmatisation. This can be a transformative journey for educators.

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