ABSTRACT

An autonomous learner has developed an intrinsic motivation that drives him or her to pursue learning for the inherent satisfaction and enjoyment that stems from the acquisition of knowledge. This chapter presents strategies for teachers to develop a classroom of more autonomous learners. In addition to some strategies and sequencing of activities to maximize their impact, the chapter presents Universal Design for Learning as a framework for thinking about all teaching and ways to apply differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all learners. While there is a focus on the experience of a novice teacher, the content of this chapter is relevant for all educators looking to reinvigorate their practice to empower students to be more in command of their own learning.

INTRODUCTION

Students of all levels respond to how accountable the teacher holds them. Although high standards are a catch phrase for some, they serve as a mantra for highly effective teachers. The challenge then becomes, how can a teacher that may be new to the profession or looking for professional development to reinvigorate his or her practice establish and consistently maintain high expectations for student performance? One answer lies in creating a classroom of learners that begin to hold higher expectations for themselves and thereby release the teacher from the responsibility.

That sounds like malarkey, however with consistent application of active learning strategies that are scaffolded to provide the students the social and academic skills to work cooperatively and independently, the students begin to drive the classroom norms and expectations higher and higher. For the teacher, challenges come along the way, which include how to create a habit of mind that includes adapting experiences in the classroom to meet the needs of all learners.

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This chapter seeks to provide the reader with several strategies and resources that he or she can use to empower students of all abilities, dispositions, and backgrounds to become more engaged with learning overall and achieve more than could be achieved in a more traditional, didactic model. This chapter is not about including students that are labeled in some way, rather it is about helping a teacher shift the climate of his or her classroom to be a space where everyone, including the teacher, engages with learning at multiple levels, every day.

Universal Design as a Frame of Mind

“Habit is a cable; we weave a thread of it each day, and at last we cannot break it” (Horace Mann as cited in Costa & Kallick, 2009). Designing instruction to meet the needs of every child in a classroom becomes a habit of mind. Few would argue that some children do not have a right to learn, but consistently ensuring that a teacher’s practices provide for every child is daunting. At first, brainstorming, designing and developing the lessons to meet the needs of all learners requires conscious attention, but with continued care to inclusive practice, the elements of universal design for learning (UDL) permeate planning without conscious thought. Universal design for learning (UDL) labels strategies and behaviors that permit students with disabilities to more easily access the regular curriculum while maintaining high standards (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2013; Chuck Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002; Jiménez, Graf, & Rose, 2007). Specifically, UDL includes stimulating success for all students through adopting assignments and activities that include multiple means of representation, action and expression designed to respect student variation and increase engagement in the active process of learning (Dalton & Ferguson, 2013).

An amazing analogy for UDL, not mine, is a dinner party (Novak, 2014; “UDL for Dinner,” n.d.). Imagine that you, like me, have a food allergy (nuts!). You go to this lovely dinner party and the appetizer comes out, cold, Thai sesame noodles with peanut sauce. You graciously decline your portion and take a Benadryl (just in case). The salad is served. Lovely mixed greens, cranberries, goat cheese and, you guessed it, itty bitty bits of candied walnuts sprinkled lovingly all over it. Pass. Now you are getting hungry, and there are only so many rolls you can eat. The main course arrives. Seriously! Who does this?! Crunchy munchy lettuce wraps (peanuts again) and green beans almondine! Just when you are about to call for pizza you hear someone raving about dessert. You make idle chitchat, but you think you just digested an internal organ because you are so hungry. Here comes dessert. Hazelnut crème brulé. If you can forget the dinner party is about food and think about it in terms of lesson design. The first lesson didn’t meet your needs, nor did the second, by the third you were starting to get emotional. If the host had asked you about your allergy they would have known that there was nothing for you to eat. The same goes for learning, but as the teacher you may have to figure out what will best feed your students intellectual needs, so that they can be academically nourished.

Origins and Application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal design for learning (UDL) grew out of the U.S. civil rights movement, and specifically the legislation focusing on individuals with disabilities (Jiménez et al., 2007; Ralabate, 2011). After nearly twenty years of legal battles, from the extension of section 504 of the Rehabilitation act of 1973 to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Mayerson, 1992), public buildings, including schools were required to be accessible to individuals with disabilities. Unfortunately, this did not provide access to