Chapter 3

Universal Design for Learning: Using UDL to Make Teacher Education More Accessible and Inclusive for All

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ABSTRACT

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for curriculum and instructional planning through which educators can maximize accessibility and minimize barriers that are often experienced by learners. Teacher educators are in a unique position to introduce UDL to future elementary teachers and support them in developing inclusive pedagogical methods early on in their careers. While Common Core State Standards can guide educators in what to teach, UDL provides a framework for how to teach. Education technology tools are used extensively within UDL to make curriculum materials more accessible and engaging. In this chapter, the UDL framework will be described along with many specific applications within elementary teacher education.

INTRODUCTION

Elementary teacher preparation programs often include at least one course related to inclusive practices or special education, but this is not always required by state standards or accrediting organizations. It is still possible for many elementary educators to complete all of their licensure requirements and step into their 21st century classroom as a first-year teacher without ever having learned how to provide an inclusive educational environment for children with disabilities. Nationally, approximately 13% of public school students aged 3-21 are categorized within the special education system under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA). This percentage does not include students with disabilities served under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, nor students with unidentified disabilities. Of the students in special education, the majority (61%) spend 80% or more of each day in general education classroom settings (NCES, 2015). There is a clear need for more focused preparation of preservice elementary teachers to provide for the needs of students with disabilities.

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Teacher educators who prepare elementary teachers have opportunities to share this responsibility across multiple courses. Particularly in programs where special education coursework is missing or minimal in scope, there is a need for distributed exposure to important theories and practices for inclusion and accessibility. Yet, teacher educators are often trained within specific areas such as literacy or mathematics education and may not themselves have the requisite knowledge of inclusive practices. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework with much potential for use by elementary teacher educators from all backgrounds, in both general education and special education courses. UDL provides educators with pedagogical techniques that are flexible and suitable for elementary education methods in all subject areas. UDL provides important methods for inclusive practices to support the variability of all learners, not just those with disabilities. Teacher educators can implement UDL themselves as well, modeling its use for preservice teachers while also making their own coursework and professional development materials more accessible for adult learners.

UDL allows us to teach with variability in mind, beginning with the design phase and continuing through instructional delivery. By planning for the variability of all learners, with an emphasis on including the students “on the margins,” educators can improve their curriculum and instruction for all students (Meyer & Rose, 2005). UDL is a structured framework that brings accommodations, scaffolds, and supports to the forefront of instructional design, rather than as an afterthought or addendum. Elementary educators who learn the principles and practices of UDL from the start of their careers are in an excellent position to form inclusive, equitable classroom communities that will support a diverse range of learners.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) includes UDL as one of the “additional supports and services” that may be provided to students with disabilities in order to help them achieve proficiency with the standards. As you will learn in this chapter, UDL can also improve curriculum and instruction for all students, by providing multiple means of content representation, student expression, and learner engagement. Elementary educators who are learning how to design instruction aligned with the CCSS guiding them in choosing what to teach can also be supported by UDL as a framework for how to teach.

The 21st century elementary teacher is also expected to leverage a variety of technology tools in the classroom, with new hardware and software applications becoming available frequently. Teacher education programs at the elementary level may or may not include dedicated coursework about educational technology. Teacher educators often provide distributed experiences with technology in all subject-area methods courses. UDL has many connections and applications that implement technology tools, many of which center around multimedia representations of content, and opportunities for elementary students to show their knowledge through media content creation. UDL provides an ideal framework for elementary educators to explore educational technology and evaluate tools for specific purposes.

In this chapter, you will be provided with a discussion of why UDL is an important and useful approach for teacher educators. You will also learn what UDL looks like in practice and how it can support elementary education coursework related to CCSS in various content areas. The chapter will incorporate numerous opportunities for the integration of educational technology within UDL. Finally, you will be provided with specific examples of how to begin implementing UDL within elementary teacher education and professional development settings.