Barriers in the implementation of UDL (Universal Design for Learning) in Indian Scenario.

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Abstract

In this paper we introduce UDL principles and implementation guidelines for teachers, and argue that UDL can have a useful application for inclusive education. There is a dire need to adopt an inclusive education policy in order to address barriers to learning in the education system. However, the implementation of this policy is hampered by the lack of teachers' skills and knowledge in differentiating the curriculum to address a wide range of learning needs. In this paper we provided a background to inclusive education policy through universal Design for Learning (UDL) and it addresses a wide range of learning needs in a single classroom. Knowledge of the UDL framework facilitates both teachers and learners [with or without disability] and provides a relatively simple and comprehensive approach for curriculum differentiation. Furthermore, teachers need to find ways to plan and work jointly, for the greatest benefit to their learners. UDL is, as its name suggests, an attempt to maximize learning in a universal manner. As such, it aims to apply the same principles to all learning rather than proposing specific learning programmes for different forms of diversity or disability. We therefore conclude that there is potential place of UDL in the implementation of inclusive education

Key words: UDL, Inclusive classroom, Curriculum, Barrier, Implementation

Introduction

A nation will not be judged by its success in the sciences, technological prowess, and its economic prosperity or even by its vast knowledge base. It will be judged by the way it takes care of its weakest citizens the young, the elderly, the sick and the disabled, the weak links in the chain. A chain is broken - - even if one link in it is broken' Professor Singapalli Balaram.

As more research is done into education and disabilities and how the two interact, general education teachers are finding themselves needing to teach in an inclusive classroom. An inclusive classroom is a general education classroom in which students with and without disabilities learns together. It is essentially the opposite of a special education classroom, where students with disabilities learn with only other students with disabilities. One of the innovative approaches in this direction is universal design learning. Universal Design is defined as the process of creating products and spaces that are usable by persons with the widest possible range of abilities and operating within the widest possible range of situations i.e. it makes things accessible to persons whether they have a disability or not. It is related to accessibility which is the development of products and spaces specifically for persons with disabilities and special needs. Its seeks social inclusion through design and is based on the idea of the design for the diverse. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides the opportunity for all students to access, participate in, and progress in the general-education curriculum by reducing barriers to instruction. Learn more about how UDL offers options for how information is presented, how students respond or demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and how students are engaged in learning. This extends the possibilities for effectively including all learners in the general

curriculum, and reducing the impact of barriers to learning in the educational environment (Dalton 2005). Inclusion in the classroom for all students is greatly enhanced when educators consider and use the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework in their planning and teaching. UDL is an approach to education which aims to give all students equal opportunity to learn. Under UDL principles, teachers use methods that allow them to reach curriculum goals while meeting the needs of students with diverse needs and learning styles. School teams spend precious time creating the foundations of inclusive programs for students with disabilities. Careful thought goes into scheduling co-taught classes, creating balanced classroom rosters, training co-teaching partners, developing collaborative relationships, and providing appropriate supports for students with disabilities (Walther-Thomas, Korinek, McLaughlin, & Williams, 2000).

Goal of UDL

The goal of UDI is to maximize the learning of students with a wide range of characteristics by applying UD principles to all aspects of instruction. This goal will only be accomplished through new approaches to educational design. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a new model for designing all aspects of the learning environment to address the wide-ranging variation of student needs that exist in an inclusive educational system. The Center for Applied Special Technology, known as CAST Inc., first described the theory of Universal Design for Learning in 1998 (CAST 1998). Based upon brain research, and extending the architectural concept of Universal Design (Center for Universal Design 1997), the framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) supports these objectives, and is highly relevant for learners with widely varying needs, including learners with and without specific disabilities (Rose & Meyer 2002). Understanding and implementing UDL, therefore, can be of great interest to educators, administrators, and education support professionals around the world.

Principles of Universal Design

The three core principles of UDL emerged from CAST's research work on the basis of learning styles, in combination with its practical work with learners (Hall, Strangman &Meyer 2003):

Multiple means of representation: provide multiple, flexible methods of presentation to support recognition learning (the HOW of learning). The teacher can present, for example, the learning materials through a variety of media (visual, auditory or tactile), and provide multiple examples that can be modified in complexity to meet a range of learning needs.

Multiple means of action and expression: provide multiple, flexible methods of action and expression to support strategic learning (the WHAT of learning). The teacher may use strategies that allow the learner to practice tasks with different levels of support and to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a diversity of ways.

Multiple means of engagement: provide multiple, flexible options for engagement to support affective learning (the WHY of learning). This principle involves creating interesting learning opportunities that motivate and stimulate learners according to their personal backgrounds and interests.

At the heart of UDL is the design of goals, methods, materials, and assessments to make them acessible for *all* students, including those with disabilities (NCUDL 2012; Rose & Meyer 2002).These UDL principles are applicable to every student in the classroom, according to Rose, because there is a fundamental mismatch between today's student population and the curriculum: While diversity is now the norm of classrooms across the country, the curriculum remains standardized. The uniformity of the school environment — a leftover factory system from the Industrial Revolution — means that students all receive standardized textbooks, learn from standardized course plans, and sit at standardized desks, despite individual differences. UDL is the recognition that this kind of environment is no longer a productive one; it is vital — and, with today's technology, possible — to acknowledge the differences among students.

UDL Process

To apply UDI, instructors should consider the potential variation in individual skills, learning styles and preferences, age, gender, sexual orientation, culture, abilities, and disabilities as they select appropriate content and strategies for the delivery of instruction and then apply universal design to all course activities and resources. Specifically, an instructor needs to:

1. Identify the course. Describe the course, its learning objectives, and its overall content.
2. Define the universe. Describe the overall population of students eligible to enroll in the course and then consider their potential diverse characteristics (e.g., with respect to gender; age; ethnicity and race; native language; learning style; and abilities to see, hear, manipulate objects, read, and communicate).
3. Involve students. Consider perspectives of students with diverse characteristics, as identified in Step 2, in the development of the course. If they are not available directly from students, gain student perspectives through diversity programs and the campus disability services office.
4. Adopt instructional strategies. Adopt overall learning and teaching philosophies and methods (e.g., differentiated instruction, constructivism, the "flipped" classroom). Integrate them with UD to ensure the full inclusion of all students.
5. Apply instructional strategies. Apply UD strategies in concert with good instructional practices (identified in Step 4) to the overall choice of course teaching methods, curricula, and assessments. Then apply UD to all lectures, classroom discussions, group work, handouts, web-based content, labs, fieldwork, assessment instruments, and other academic activities and materials to maximize the learning of students with the wide variety of characteristics identified in Step 2.
6. Plan for accommodations. Learn campus procedures for addressing accommodation requests (e.g., arrangement of sign language interpreters) from specific students for whom the course design does not automatically provide full access. Include the information in the syllabus.
7. Evaluate. Monitor the effectiveness of instruction through observation and feedback from students with the diverse set of characteristics identified in Step 2, assess learning, and modify the course as appropriate.

Difficulty in assessing diverse learner needs

All learners have strengths, weaknesses, and preferred areas of interest within the context of the learning environment. Using a UDL lens, speech-language pathologists and other

educators can identify the strengths, needs, and interests of individual students across the three learning networks (i.e., recognition, action and expression, engagement) and combine them into a UDL class/group profile. Who are these students? How do they learn best? What strengths, cultural backgrounds, learning styles, and interests.

Meeting all students needs

The UDL framework provides a flexible, responsive curriculum that reduces or eliminates barriers to learning. Using a UDL approach, SLPs and other educators offer curriculum options that present information and content in varied ways, differentiate the manner in which learners can express what they know, and engage students in meaningful, authentic learning. With UDL, more students are:

a. Engaged in their own education.
b. Learning in greater breadth and depth.
c. Achieving at higher levels.
d. Motivated to continue learning

Major barriers and their solution

In Indian scenario different barriers in implementing UDL includes curriculum differentiation, lack of trained teachers, lack of engagement & motivation, and lack of money.

Curriculum barrier

Most curricula are designed as if all students learn in the same way. In reality, the idea of a "typical" learner is a myth. Likewise, barriers to learning may not be present within students but rather in the intersection of students and the curriculum. By analyzing the characteristics outlined in a UDL class/group profile in light of the flexible methods and materials offered through a UDL approach, SLPs and other educators can move beyond identifying individual learning difficulties to focusing on and addressing the barriers that exist within the curriculum. When provided with the right tools for accessing and understanding information and content that is of interest, students with diverse learning profiles can find appropriate challenges, engage in the learning situation, and progress..

Lack of trained teachers

Before the students can use the tools, the teachers may have to familiarize themselves with how to utilize the tools and then teach the students. From there, students are then able to access those resources. With proper training, teachers can implement these strategies; however, that training is not always available. In beginning the implementation of UDL, teachers can be challenged with how to change their old teaching techniques to the new ones; this can be perceived as another barrier. Finally, teachers may need additional support developing accommodations for children with learning disabilities. Similarly, students with an accelerated learning speed may need different accommodations. Training serves a key contribution to success when implementing UDL.

Lack of engagement and motivation

Another barrier is how to keep students engaged and motivated in the learning environment. This relates to how well a teacher knows his or her student. This applies to how a teacher may have to accommodate a learning environment based on the background of each

student. Implementing different strategies when a student does not understand may be another barrier. Students are more willing to express themselves if there is a connection among the material, the learning environment, and the student. Barriers to implementing the principle, Means of Engagement, relate to keeping students engaged and motivated. Ultimately, students need to reach their full potential, however students may not understand the purpose of the lesson. Another barrier that this principle addresses is the idea that students need to be consistently motivated. Students are very diverse in the classroom, and one barrier may be that teachers want to ensure that their students have meaningful access to the curricula. The assignments may not have value in the students' lives. To encourage engagement, teachers can optimize individual choice and autonomy. Teachers may struggle with keeping students on task when the instruction is not relevant or engaging to the students, but the UDL framework provides some guidance on how to reduce that struggle. Using different forms of media to present the same content and customizing learning pertaining to a student's interests encourages engagement and motivation. Again, when a student feels a connection to the content, he or she may learn more from being more motivated. Finally, students are likely to be more engaged in a subject when teachers track mastery of the topic and provide regular feedback to the student

Lack of finance

Money may be also viewed as a barrier. Teachers may feel that they don't have the finances to support implementing UDL, even though many of the resources that exist though are free of charge. Many companies and online programs are free of charge to use. Once teachers are able to learn how to use the different resources, applying the resources into the classroom may be more affordable than perceived.

Conclusion

There is an urgent need for teachers to understand and address the range of diverse learning needs in their classrooms. In order to do this teachers need new skills, training, and support from the educational system. Furthermore, teachers need to find ways to plan and work jointly, for the greatest benefit to their learners. UDL is, as its name suggests, an attempt to maximize learning in a universal manner. As such, it aims to apply the same principles to all learning rather than proposing specific learning programmes for different forms of diversity or disability. This allows for a certain simplicity that is very attractive to the busy teacher. If she/he can implement the basic principles by planning for a variety of presentation methods, allowing for different forms of expression and engaging learners emotionally, then a whole range of needs can be met. An additional advantage of UDL is that both in-service and pre-service teachers can readily share the language of UDL about the curriculum for learners. By paring down teaching and learning to the three processes of flexible methods of presentation, expression and engagement, all those working with the learner can collaborate with a common understanding. The authors see this as an avenue that will enhance inclusion of learners who experience barriers to learning and promote effective transition from school to productive work.

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