Universal Design for Learning

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COMMON CORE STANDARDS
REVISITED

"In Common Core, they expect me to figure out how to do the math problem. If I knew how to do it, I wouldn't need to come to school. I just want someone to show me!"

These are the words of a ninth-grade student with ADHD. Like this girl, as the Common Core State Standards become established in forty-five states nationwide, parents and students often express growing pains.

Although the shifts inherent in the Common Core State Standards present challenges, there are also advantages. The standards are a set of benchmarks, not a curriculum. They provide a list of skills that need to be covered in the course of a given year. School districts are free to choose curricula and textbooks and teachers are free to teach in the fashion they feel is appropriate for their students. One intention of the Common Core State Standards is to provide consistency across school districts, so if and when a student moves from one district or state to another, valuable instructional time is not lost. In addi-

tion, they provide teachers with a common language for communication about strategies across the country.

Students with ADHD face special challenges in meeting Common Core State Standards. The standards place an emphasis on critical thinking—and many students with ADHD are in too much of hurry to stop and think. There is a new emphasis on nonfiction text rather than literature. Students with ADHD remember best when instruction appeals to their emotions. Students are urged to "read like a detective, write like an investigative reporter"; yet students with ADHD may have difficulty focusing on details. Discussion is emphasized. The student with ADHD often lacks the prerequisite social language skills to take turns in a conversation and communicate abstract ideas.

What's a teacher to do?

A different way of thinking

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for differentiating curriculum that is in tune with Common Core standards. UDL is a different way of thinking about adaptations and accommodations. Historically, educators have viewed disability as inherent in the student. UDL suggests that we must examine the barriers present in the learning environment before we label the student disabled.

UDL is rooted in the architectural concept of physical barriers. For example, a curb represents a physical barrier to the wheelchair user. When the curb is enhanced with a curb cut, the crossing becomes accessible not only to the wheelchair user but also to someone pulling luggage, to the mother pushing a baby stroller, and to the bicyclist. In the same way, when the educational environment is examined for barriers to learning, gateways can be opened for a multitude of learners. UDL promotes the idea that from the outset of designing instruction, the educational environment and curriculum must be examined for barriers to learning.

Instead of viewing some students as disabled, the UDL approach considers each student as possessing unique learning characteristics that fall in the spectrum of diversity. All classes are diverse, comprised of students who, for example, may know more than one language, students who may learn best through artistic expression, and students who learn best through movement. When the educational environment provides many options for learning, all students benefit.

UDL originated in the 1990s as an outgrowth of the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST). David H. Rose, EdD, of Harvard Graduate School of Education, was instrumental in the search for identifying universal structures that would support the learning of all students in any learning environment. These structures are based in neurological research on how students learn. The framework is organized into principles, guidelines and checkpoints. In addition, a specific format for planning lessons according to the UDL concept is available at the CAST website.

Brain-based learning

UDL's three basic principles are based on brain imaging that demonstrates which areas of the brain are activated at three phases of learning:

- **Engagement** (affective networks): the "why" of learning
- **Recognition** (recognition networks): the "what" of learning
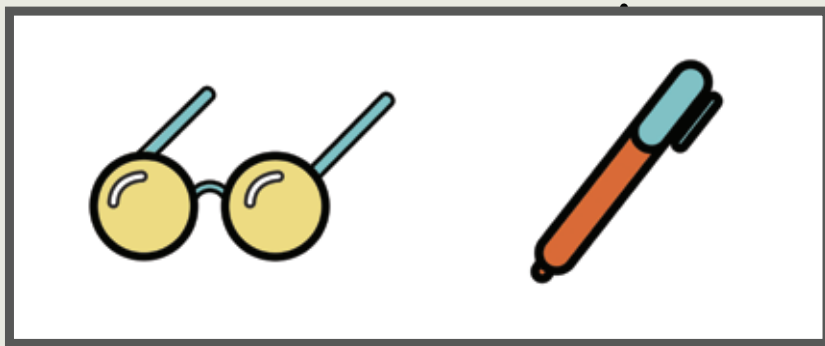- **Action and Expression** (strategic networks): the "how" of learning.

UDL presents guidance on ways that teachers can craft instruction to activate these specific areas of the brain by providing options for engagement, options for recognition, and options for action and expression.

When multiple means of engagement, recognition, and action and expression are provided, all students have increased opportunity to be involved in the learning process. For example, a fifth-grade student with ADHD may have difficulty engaging in writing a research paper about an assigned state, such as Kansas, because of organizational and fine motor challenges. This student may be eligible for an accommodation that would allow an alternative to writing, such as making a video or PowerPoint presentation. When offered this accommodation, the student with ADHD may be the only or one of very few students allowed an alternative choice. S/he may feel singled out as different and this sometimes leads to rejecting accommodations.

When the principles of UDL are applied, all students in the class are able to choose from a variety of response modes depending on their personal talents and interests. Implementation of UDL in no way removes the obligation to provide accommodations. However, it enhances the learning environment so that all students benefit from learning differences present in their classroom. The perception

of that student with ADHD shifts from being a student with a writing "disability" to an individual who, like his peers is capable of producing an informative video.

A multitude of resources are available at the CAST UDL interactive website to help teachers remove barriers to learning in the classroom. The advantage of using the UDL framework is that it calls out and makes explicit the needs for classroom teachers to address with all students. Guidelines are provided for each of the basic principles of engagement, recognition, and action and expression.

- Three guidelines are suggested for optimizing engagement for all students: provide options for recruiting interest, provide options for sustaining effort and persistence, and provide options for self-regulation. Engagement is often challenging for students with ADHD.

- The guidelines for the principle of representation are: provide options for perception (vision, hearing and touch), provide options for language, expression and symbols (pictures, letters, icons, and nonstatic media) and provide options for comprehension.

- The guidelines for the principle of action and expression include: provide options for physical action, expression and communication, and executive function.

Each of the guidelines are further delineated into checkpoints that include references to examples of materials and resources that teachers can use to address each principle in depth.
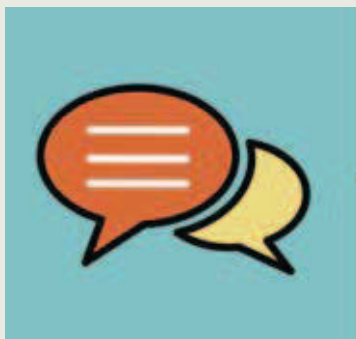
Implementing UDL in the classroom is practical and can mediate the frustration so many students encounter when faced with the new emphasis on academic rigor posed by Common Core State Standards. My ninth-grade student who feels lost when required to generate ways to solve abstract problems can have the opportunity to be provided scaffolding to structure her problemsolving. The second-grade boy who has difficulty staying in his seat would have the option of using movement to express himself. When implemented with fidelity, UDL has the potential to create access to the most challenging curricula for the most challenged student. ◉

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Meyer, A.; Rose, D.; Gordon, D. (2014) *Universal Design for Learning: Theory and Practice.* CAST, Inc. Available in print and as an online interactive e-book at **www.cast.org**

Nelson, L. & Posey, A. (2014) Design and Deliver: Planning and Teaching Using Universal Design for Learning. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

Novak, K. (2014) *UDL Now! A Teacher's Monday Morning Guide to Implementing Common Core Standards Using Universal Design for Learning.* CAST, Inc.

Rapp, W. (2014) *Universal Design for Leaning In Action.* Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

National Center on Universal Design for Learning, **www.udlcenter.org**