

# Universal Design for Learning: Developing common perspectives

## Final Grant Report

### Description

This project explored Universal Design for Learning principles, ideas and perspectives in a collaborative group. The collaboration of teams from three schools helped develop a professional community with the focus on providing a supportive and flexible learning environment to meet the needs of all learners. This collaborative approach facilitated the sharing of research, discussion of best practices, and exploration of how this approach can bridge naturally between the elementary and early high school contexts.

This project included two elementary school teams from schools with similar student profiles and a team from the Cycle 1 secondary of the high school into which the elementary students will transition at the end of Cycle 3 Elementary. The project worked to develop a collaborative and cooperative environment for the participants, and allowed for discussions related to transitions to high school. Creating opportunities for deeper learning for all students was a central focus. In order to achieve this goal, strategies to increase engagement, improve respect among students, and develop appreciation of different learning environments among students and teachers were explored.

Collaborative sessions proved to be a great benefit to all. Professional connections were developed and enhanced throughout the following sessions.

Session 1: Worked to define Universal Design for Learning and explore why each school felt a need to explore this philosophy. A portrait of where each school was currently was developed. Commonalities of needs, challenges and strengths were highlighted and discussed.

Session 2: Shared progress from the last meeting, and discussed challenges that emerged, including concerns about assessing students. Read *Teaching to Diversity* chapter 2 (pg 14 - 20) sharing key points from the reading. Barriers to implementation were brainstormed.

Session 3: Examined the barriers and explored possible solutions to UDL. Many of the themes that emerged were around assessment, school culture and systems/structures in schools. Groups worked to develop ways to tackle these barriers and plan for them in their schools moving forward.

Session 4: Each school developed personal plans and goals for their school. Feedback from other school groups was given on the individual school plan. Action plans were completed for each school plan.

Session 5: Feedback was given from teachers that attended recent sessions with Jennifer Katz and a Cast UDL conference. New learning was shared. Feedback on the progress on the action plan established in the last session was provided. Steps to continue to move forward were

discussed. All members were asked to provide a visual representation of learning over the course of these discussions.

Session 6 - Individual sessions for each school:

- St. Jude – Planned for staff meeting professional development opportunities throughout the year ahead with a focus on assessment. Built a folder of assessment ideas that can be shared in future meetings with the school staff.
- Good Shepherd – Developed an action plan for implementation in the school the following year.
- Centennial – Visit to a high school that is implementing UDL for further ideas.

While professional growth from all participants was evident, there were a few challenges that need to be considered in the future. One significant concern was the availability of substitute teachers. This added pressure on all administrators involved and in one session meant that a school team could not attend due to unavailability of substitute teachers for their school. A second challenge was having undivided administrative ability to commit uninterrupted time to the planning and progress. Often, due to issues arising in respective schools, the administrator had to leave for parts of the discussions to tend to highly sensitive issues occurring in their schools. This meant that, at times, the administrators missed rich conversations or opportunities to explore ideas with their teams. Similarly, making time to explore the topics of discussion outside of the committed meeting dates was challenging given the demands of everyday life in schools. In order to positively affect the whole school culture, there must be ongoing conversations and exploration of ideas beyond the discussions in our individual sessions. Finally, the purchasing policies limit access to UDL furniture to facilitate learning spaces for all. While teachers were creative in creating seating and work spaces, access to appropriate physical materials would allow teachers to use their creativity on designing and develop learning opportunities for student and staff.

## Project Goals

We worked to create opportunities for learners to move beyond simply "covering" topics in course material to the mastery of the material. Truly learning material to a level of mastery is a process that requires learners who want to learn, who know how to learn strategically, and who develop skills to become life long learners. The three schools targeted in this project have many high risk students that would benefit from the opportunity to develop their profile as learners through the objectives of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Through the lens of the UDL framework the project team, with the support of the ASSET support group, focused on the following goals:

- 1) Develop a broader perspective of strategies to diminish learning barriers for all
- 2) Develop strategies to provide structured support and increase understanding of individuals as learners.
- 3) Explore various ways to represent knowledge and expression of learning,
- 4) Expand the philosophy and approach to the larger school community to impact school cultures.

These goals were all touched upon in the various sessions. There was a clear expression of the need to reach all learners that emerged several times in our discussions. From sharing best practices to exploring readings and online resources, this was an ongoing discussion point that lay at the core of conversations. While many ideas emerged, accountability and assessment often emerged as concerns for the teachers and, at times, put some practices that were suggested into question. Nevertheless, there was an overall intention and direction towards meeting the needs of all students.

The importance of developing clear classroom expectations and teaching classroom rules was established as a pillar of success. Within a clear structure, teachers can become facilitators in the learning process, rather than purveyors of knowledge. One of the benefits of including several schools was that we rotated between schools for our meetings. This allowed teachers the opportunity to visit other classrooms and candidly share their personal struggles and successes in developing classrooms to facilitate the UDL approach. This time to explore classrooms together was greatly appreciated by all participants. One of the topics that emerged often in the discussions about establishing clear classroom expectations was the importance of explicitly fostering social and emotional learning of all students. This key learning was felt to be a supportive factor in the shift of school cultures and student progress. Ideas and tools were shared among the school teams to help facilitate this vital area of learning for all.

Representing knowledge in a variety of ways was often linked with conversation of assessment. When discussing barriers, developing short-term action plans, and designing actions to impact the larger school culture, assessment continually emerged as vital to the sustainability of implementing a UDL approach in our schools. Groups worked to explore rubrics, shared ideas about plans to explore formative and summative assessment, and experimented with various representations of knowledge to demonstrate learning. While there was considerable discussion in this area, more time to examine possibilities for assessment, develop rubrics and explore the research on assessment in UDL would have been appreciated by all.

As each school begins to embark on the sharing of knowledge and to expand the UDL philosophy, the teams recognize the challenges that lie ahead. Changing culture and embarking on system-wide change is a challenge. However, each team over the course of these professional development sessions, has developed a plan embedded in research, founded on the best interests of all students and structured to support an inclusive school setting. The teachers and administrators have each become leaders in their respective schools armed with plans to move their personally selected projects forward. While each school team has a school appropriate plan for moving UDL forward in the year ahead, more time to develop support materials for the plans would be ideal in the future. Also, elements of the visual representation to share with other school teams and the wider community are still a work in progress. This will be completed in the months ahead to be shared more broadly.

## Project Outcomes

The teachers demonstrated knowledge and expansion of ideas in many areas throughout the ongoing discussions, activities, visits and planning periods. These included:

- Increased flexibility in the presentation of content and allowing students different ways to present what they know.
- Better understanding of the impact of the social and emotional components of learning .
- Better understanding of the importance of developing student resiliency so that students can be empowered to be involved in their own learning and better able to advocate on their own behalf.
- Additional strategies to further develop a respectful learning environment for all students
- Strategies that help students demonstrate deeper learning of the material to be taught.
- More strategies to increase engagement though positive learning environments.
- Respect among students, understanding of different learning and appreciation of different learning environments among students and teachers.
- How collaboration, communication, creativity and cooperation are interconnected in a learning experience.
- Ideas to explore in the area of project based learning/problem based learning.
- The use of Bloom’s Taxonomy to structure tasks and assessment as a best practice to support high-risk learners.
- Strategies were explored to “Teach to the edges” so that even the most marginalized students have access to good teaching and learning.
- Teachers explored professional development opportunities on UDL outside of the days provided in this grant for their own personal growth (Florida conference and Jennifer Katz workshops.)
- Teacher reflection on actions and practices was shared explicitly within our safe learning environment.
- Visited and explored other UDL classrooms within our school teams. The high school team visited another high school already implementing UDL to see how the philosophy can be structure in that environment.
- Shifted assessment as a barrier to implementation of UDL to a focus of the strength of the UDL philosophy.
- Explored rubric creation in collaborative teams.
- Teachers expressed more enjoyment of teaching and learning.
- Discussed more ideas to support inclusive classroom environments with students of very diverse needs.
- Equity of access to knowledge and access to learning for all; brings to the forefront.

## Reinvestment

As the school teams involved moved from planning, reflection and discussion towards planning, creating and implementing, they developed more collaborative skills. Discussion and reflection were the norm in our meetings, as they should be in the school at large. This was modeled and facilitated throughout all sessions.

Teachers have additional tools with which to work towards a more inclusive environment in our schools. Project based learning allows that material in the curriculum to be integrated across all domains. This authentic learning is more engaging for all types of learners, and allows for more flexibility in the selection of assessments. Teachers also became more at ease with developing their own rubrics based on essential outcomes. This shift in focus means that students are assessed based on what they can do (asset based assessment) rather than what they cannot do (deficit based assessment). Each school developed its own plan for the progression of personally selected goals for the year ahead (see Appendix). Addressing school culture, navigating structural elements of school and expanding ideas of assessment were outlined as areas of focus for the schools. Plans for the year ahead are prepared with the aim of more broad scale implementation across the schools involved.

This project demonstrated positive personal, professional and cultural growth in the people and schools involved. There are many areas of great progress but, as with any plan, there are always areas for improvement. Some suggestions include:

- Allowing all project participants the opportunity to go and visit a school applying UDL before embarking on the project.
- Twinning cycle partners across schools and allowing for more high schools to be represented.
- Talking more with teachers that are already on board; visiting classrooms.
- Possible exploration of the link between Response to Intervention (RTI) and UDL.

Overall, the time spend this year on exploring UDL, sharing success and challenges with other school teams, and working on building what can be in the year ahead in the environment of UDL is invigorating. The school teams are prepared and have plans to lead learning forward and help their schools change and grow. Watching teachers move from uncertainty of the path ahead to planning for cultural systematic change as pedagogical leaders has been an outcome that was not part of the original objectives, but that is more valuable than anything we could have planned for.