



Equity Dispatch

Universal Design for Learning: Creating Equitable Learning Environments!



IMPACT: Educate, Engage, Empower--For Equity

"Fair doesn't mean giving every child the same thing, it means giving every child what they need."

-Rick Lavoie

Educate

New School Year, Renewed Commitment to Inclusive Practices: Creating Classrooms that are Universally Designed for Learning

Mr. Cortez is a first grade teacher and it is time for him to teach his annual unit on dinosaurs. As with any other class, this year's students have different learning preferences, and Mr. Cortez wonders how to proactively develop his curricular unit to engage all students in learning while enabling them to demonstrate their competence. The framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) may provide Mr. Cortez with the answers to his questions and facilitate the tailoring of instruction to the individual learning needs of students.

The concept of Universal Design gained traction in the field of architecture in the 1980s, where it encouraged the planning and creation of structures with ease of accessibility for all persons in

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Meet the Authors:

The newsletter at the Great Lakes Equity Center is researched, written, and edited by Lorne Balmer and [Erin Macey](#)

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Equity Spotlight

mind (Center for Universal Design, 2012). This contrasted with the trend of retrofitting, or retroactively solving problems of access, which was often costly and unattractive. With Universal Design, we began to see cut curbs and low-floor buses instead of unsightly ramps and other built-on structural modifications.

More recently, the concept of Universal Design has been applied to education (Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002) and has proven to hold significant practicality in advancing equitable educational opportunities because it represents a paradigm shift from solving the "problems" of student difference; instead, it promotes an approach in which the accessibility of the *classroom, curriculum, instruction* and *assessment* are considered in advance. The media and materials used within these four arenas are contingent upon and must be reflective of the individual strengths, needs, and interests of all learners within the classroom. By applying the principles of Universal Design to *learning*, practitioners can prevent barriers and provide all students with equal opportunities to learn through their planning and pedagogical strategies (National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2008).

The creation of a student-centered classroom environment is pivotal to the success of UDL. Because "it is the environment that informs and documents the social interactions that will go on there, the encounters, friendships, and learning that will occur" (Roskos & Newman, 2011, p. 110), educators must ensure that all students feel comfortable in the learning environment. To start, students should have the ability to access all materials, equipment, and technology contained within the classroom (Flores, 2008). Beyond securing the physical elements of the classroom environment, gaining students' input on classroom norms and operations gives them a vested interest in the daily occurrences of the classroom. Negotiating these agreements on everyday classroom practices, routines, and rituals helps to create a classroom culture that is inclusive and empowering for students. It is critical for students to be able to communicate their ideas freely in the learning environment (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2011). The creation of a learning space that is flexible and meets the needs and interests of students is essential in fostering the development of a student-centered classroom environment (Roskos & Newman, 2011).

Beyond creating a student-centered classroom environment, UDL calls upon the educator to deliver a curriculum that considers the background knowledge and interests of students in order to maximize their learning outcomes (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2011). In addition to solely building the curriculum around student interests and lived experiences, teachers "must adopt a multicultural curriculum that is rigorous and relevant" (Ford & Kea, 2009, p. 13) and ultimately enables them to learn at the mastery level. The curriculum should be crafted to create conditions in which students perceive a relevance between the learning materials and their lives and possess a general interest to learn the content (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2011). Cultivating curriculum that is culturally responsive to students and motivates their desire to learn remains imperative.

Once the curriculum has been established, the process of conveying it through effective instruction must be considered. Educators must provide multiple outlets of perception (i.e. auditory, visual, and tactile) to students so they can perceive information regardless of sensory dis/abilities, cultural differences, or learning modalities (Flores, 2012, Scott, McGuire, & Shaw, 2001). In conjunction with providing students with accessible information, utilizing multiple forms of instructional media (e.g. hands-on activities, trade books, videos) is crucial. Instructional strategies should be selected to draw on students' various learning strengths (Flores, 2008). In



Jeff Diedrich earned a master's degree in speech-language pathology and worked in a public school system providing direct support to students with disabilities for several years before transitioning to the directorship of two statewide projects funded by the Michigan Department of Education's Office of Special Education.

The first project Jeff directs focuses on improving outcomes for all students in the area of mathematics while the second seeks to reduce environmental and instructional barriers that prevent students from successful outcomes (including post-school) through the framework of UDL, accessible instructional materials, and assistive technology.

Through his directorship of these projects, Mr. Diedrich has led a variety of initiatives to further educators' knowledge of UDL. As a result of his work in pilot schools throughout Michigan, Jeff played an integral role in creating a guiding document for educators to follow when creating UDL environments entitled the *UDL Critical Elements*. His work has led to the creation of a significant amount of resources centered on UDL that are available to all educators interested in this construct for learning.

addition, remember assistive technologies - such as alternate keyboards - are available to accommodate the needs of learners whom these devices would benefit during instruction (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2011). The effective educator provides continued support and scaffolding to all students throughout the instructional process.

Utilizing assessment practices informed by UDL will provide an accurate representation of student skills and knowledge. Inclusive assessment processes should be flexible and clear about what educators are attempting to measure (National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2008). Teachers often use assessments, unintentionally, to test a variety of skills that provide little insight into the student's actual competencies in a given area, as when a math test requires reading and analytical skills to solve a computation problem. Therefore, teachers should offer a variety of assessment or project options for students to demonstrate what they know. Students also need to be encouraged to create goals to guide their learning and methods for representing their learning. These types of responsive assessment techniques ultimately allow students to exhibit their understanding of concepts (Flores, 2008).

As an equity assistance center, we are interested in educational frameworks that provide support to educators in the creation of student-centered and inclusive educational environments. In the development of these student-centered educational environments, viewing learning through the lens of Universal Design holds promise because it ensures that all students have equal access to and participate in high quality learning experiences from the start.

Engage

"At the end of the day, it is about making sure the students are successful."
-Jeff Diedrich, MITS Director

Michigan's Integrated Technology Supports, or MITS, is a statewide mandated activities project funded through the Michigan Department of Education's Office of Special Education that is actively engaged in applying the UDL framework in schools through [technical assistance and resource dissemination](#). Through their work, the staff members at MITS hope to teach all students based on their individual learning preferences and needs. UDL made sense for their project because the framework focuses on building the appropriate supports into curriculum, instruction, and assessment to ensure the success of all students.

As a part of their work, staff members at MITS piloted a number of model classrooms in school settings across Michigan. Through these pilots, the center developed what it calls the four [critical elements](#) essential to implementing and maintaining Universal Design for Learning practices. These include: clear goals; inclusive, intentional planning; flexible methods and materials; and timely progress monitoring. These critical elements have been widely adopted by other organizations looking to apply Universal Design for Learning in educational settings.

MITS staff has witnessed great successes through working with educational consultants and teachers to design instruction based on the principles of UDL. These successes have been evidenced by the development of the *UDL Critical Elements* and the creation of a more engaging learning environment for both teachers and students. However, because adopting UDL ultimately calls for a shift in instructional practices and belief systems, there is still work to be done.

Through collaborative efforts with state agencies, school districts, and other organizations, the MITS staff members develop resources and supports for teachers and school districts wishing to implement the framework of UDL.

Michigan Integrated Technology Supports recommends these sources to utilize the principles of UDL:

- [UDL Exchange](#) allows users to identify and create UDL based resources

Save the Date!

The Great Lakes Equity Center will be hosting the Equity Leaders Institute!

WHEN: Winter 2013 (specific dates TBA)

WHERE: Indianapolis, IN

TOPIC: Advancing Educational Equity

FOCUS: Participants will learn to apply key equity tools and strategies for addressing multifaceted issues related to teaching and learning of diverse students.

Upcoming Events

Indiana

October 17-21, 2012
[Council of the Great City School 56th Annual Fall Conference](#)
Indianapolis, IN

Minnesota

October 04, 2012
[Bullying Prevention: Everyone's Responsibility: What Parents Can Do](#)
6:30 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
PACER Center
Bloomington, MN

October 22, 2012
[Planning for Educational Inclusion](#)
6:30 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
PACER Center
Bloomington, MN

October 28-30, 2012
[28th Annual International Conference on Young Children with Special Needs and Their Families](#)
Minneapolis, MN

- [UDL Studio](#) is a great resource for designing instructional presentations
- [The Universal Design for Learning and Implementation Research Network](#) is an excellent resource for learning how to effectively apply UDL to professional practice
- [Michigan Integrated Technology Website](#) can be used to locate presentations on UDL and learn more about assistive technologies

The Great Lakes Equity Center would like to extend a special thank you to Mr. Jeff Diedrich for sharing the information used to create this article.

Empower

Something to Watch!



This [video](#) serves as a great exemplar on understanding UDL. By breaking down the term "Universal Design," this video teaches viewers the importance of applying the concept of Universal Design to education. Thus, the idea of UDL is realized. By understanding the diverse ways in which individuals learn, curriculum, instruction, and assessment can be designed initially without having to make modifications or alterations for individual students. Three principles for implementing UDL as well as specific examples are discussed throughout this video. By working to ensure classroom practices are centered on UDL, there is promise for all students to have engaging, unique, and successful learning experiences.

Something to Read!

Applying the educational construct of UDL to your classroom does not have to be a daunting task. *Universal Design for Learning in the Classroom: Practical Applications* provides you with useful information on how to make this transformation happen. This book gives a detailed description on UDL, its origins, why it is necessary to apply to classroom practice, and which brain networks associated with UDL. The specific applications of UDL to the subject areas of English Language Arts, Science, Math, History, and the Arts are discussed in detail. Teachers can also learn effective strategies for using technology in their instruction to

Illinois

September 20, 2012
[Fall Conference](#)
Northern Illinois RtI Partnership
through Illinois ASPIRE-North
Tinley Park Conference Center
Chicago, IL

September 26-27, 2012
[School Response Conference](#)
Northern Illinois University
Naperville, IL

October 11-13, 2012
[Annual Conference](#)
National Association of State Boards
of Education (NASBE)
Chicago, IL

October 31-November 3, 2012
[74th Annual Conference](#)
American Association of School
Personnel Administrators (AASPA)
Chicago, IL

Wisconsin

September 20-21, 2012
[2012 Fall Superintendents
Conference](#)
Wisconsin Association of School
District Administrators (WASDA)
Madison WI

October 10-11, 2012
[Region 4 PTAC Networking Summit](#)
Milwaukee, WI

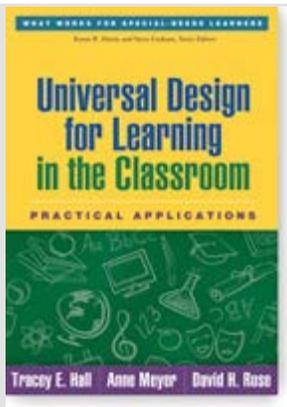
October 11-12, 2012
[WI RtI Center Foundational
Overview: Setting the Stage and
Planning for Systems Change
Workshop](#)
Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin

Michigan

November 6-10, 2012
[2012 Teacher Education Division
\(TED\) Conference](#)
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Ohio

September 26-27, 2012
[Special Education Leadership
Conference: Closing the
Achievement Gap](#)
Columbus, OH



create inclusive classroom environments. Visit this [link](#) to read a sample chapter.

Something to Use!



Are you interested in writing a lesson plan or even an entire curricular unit based on the principles of UDL? This tool is for you! Created by Center for Applied Special Technology, a non-profit research organization working to expand learning opportunities for all individuals through UDL, the UDL Lesson Builder walks teachers through the process of creating individual lessons and units with a UDL framework in mind. This tool provides examples of lesson plans and curricular units written using the principles of UDL and provides users with the opportunity to create their own lesson plans and units that adhere to these principles. In addition to creating their own lessons, users can save and edit these lessons for future use. This is a must-use [tool](#) for all educators wanting to provide all students, regardless of dis/ability, with equal opportunities to access curriculum and instruction.

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In the News

[Technology can be used as a catalyst for increasing student performance by individualizing instruction](#)

EDUCATION NEWS

[Several school districts are undergoing educational reform through the educational framework of UDL](#)



Join the Conversation on Facebook!

What would help your school implement UDL principles to meet the needs of all learners?

Professional learning opportunities on UDL

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Disclaimer

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Technical assistance from outside agencies

More support in using instructional technology in the classroom

Collaboration time for teachers to engage in co-planning around UDL principles

Other (please specify)

