

A Primer on Universal Design for Special Education Administrators

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Reality check: How many of the following statements do you agree with?

- The range of academic diversity in the classroom has increased in recent years.
- Teachers working with students in inclusion settings face a relentless demand to modify curricular, instructional, and assessment materials.
- Students who cannot read at grade level struggle throughout the school day.
- Instructional modifications made for students with disabilities often can help many other children in a classroom.
- The current emphasis on helping all children achieve high academic standards means much more effort must be devoted to helping struggling students.

Teachers and administrators across the country are facing enormous pressure to improve student learning. However, the conditions under which we work make this expectation exceedingly challenging.

While not a panacea, “universal design”(UD) offers a potential solution through the design of instruction that anticipates the full range of diversity found in American classrooms and providing supports before they are needed. The purpose of this article is to provide a very brief introduction to UD, its implications for special education administrators, and resources for additional information.

Historical Context of Universal Design

The principles of universal design have emerged from our understanding of the design of physical environments for individuals with disabilities. Perhaps the best example of the success of universal design principles are curb cuts. Originally designed to improve mobility for people with disabilities within our communities, curb cuts not only accomplished that, but also improved access for people with baby strollers, roller blades, bikes, etc. Readers interested in additional information about the origins of universal design are encouraged to visit the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University (<http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/>).

In the 1990s, universal design concepts were applied to computers. Gregg Vanderheiden at the TRACE Center at the University of Wisconsin, Madison spearheaded conversations among the disability community and technology developers concerning initiatives that include disability accessibility software as part of the operating system. This means that access would be provided as the computer came out

of the box (rather than require a consumer to track down an assistive technology specialist to make specialized modifications). Today, accessibility control panels are available on every computer. To learn more about the design initiatives that make products more useful for everyone, read the following document produced by staff at TRACE: ([http://trace.wisc.edu/projects /](http://trace.wisc.edu/projects/)).

Universal Design for Learning

Today, researchers and educational leaders are making a concerted effort to apply universal design principles to learning. A leader in the area of universal design for learning has been the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST). In 1999, CAST received a five-year grant from the Office of Special Education Programs to establish the Center for Accessing the General Education Curriculum (<http://www.cast.org/>). In their view, universal design is a critical issue if students with disabilities are going to be able to access the general education curriculum. CAST now sponsors the National Consortium on Universal Design for Learning. Readers interested in becoming an Affiliate Partner may do so by visiting: <http://www.cast.org/pd/consortium/index.html>

The Promise of UD

Without seeing a class list, in a class of 30 middle school students, one can anticipate that 5-7 students have below grade level reading skills, 3-5 students will have learning disabilities, 1-2 may have vision or hearing difficulties, and 1-2 students may have a primary language other than English. The current model of curriculum accommodations requires that these students first be identified and then special support services provided. The promise of UD suggests that instructional materials can be designed which provide adjustable instructional design controls (think of these as a volume control slider that is adjustable to be off or some level between low and high).

UD control panels could be included in all instructional software and be accessed by students and teachers when an adjustment is needed. Just think of it: do you need reading materials at a lower readability? Just go into the control panel and reset the slider and the same materials will be presented. Want a glimpse of the future? Visit: Windows on the Universe (<http://www.windows.ucar.edu>) and explore how rich instructional content can be presented at three reading levels so that students can decide which level is most appropriate for them.

Some students may need support in the form of text-to-speech so that they can hear and understand information they couldn't read independently. A tool like the CAST AspireReader (<http://www.cast.org/products/ereader/index.html>) is an example of a web browser that is built with reading and note taking supports. In the past this type of tool was considered to be assistive technology, given only to those who needed it. However, research is suggesting that most students in a classroom could benefit from well-designed instructional supports.

Implications of UD for Administrators

The potential impact of UD has important implications for special education administrators. Consider the following ideas for making an action plan:

1. Make a personal commitment to learn more about UD. Download and read the following article:
 - [Using Flexible Technology to Meet the Needs of Diverse Learners: What Teachers Can Do](http://www.wested.org/cs/we/view/rs/763); By: Julie Duffield, Lisa Wahl. Available online at <http://www.wested.org/cs/we/view/rs/763>.
2. Enhance your organizational capacity to respond to UD developments. Encourage a staff member to become an Affiliate Partner of National Consortium on Universal Design for Learning (<http://www.cast.org/pd/consortium/index.html>), free, to keep your school/district/organization up-to-date about UD developments.
3. Facilitate staff development about UD. Contact training resource agencies in the state of Ohio (<http://www.ocali.org>) or your regional State Support Team (SST).

Concluding Thoughts

Presently, the marketplace has only a handful of products with UD features. Nonetheless, this development is an important trend for teachers, therapists, administrators, and technology specialists interested technology-enhanced student learning. I encourage you to learn more about UD and become involved in the emerging conversations among developers, researchers, and practioners.

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