Building Solid Bases: Designing Culturally Responsive UDL Professional Development with Jamaican Educators

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Abstract  
Faculty and doctoral students from Jamaica and the United States showcase key strategies for designing UDL professional development, through an in-depth examination of the priorities of stakeholders. Introductory online modules effectively gathered educators’ perspectives about UDL classroom connections, implementation interests, and challenges. Focus groups further clarified areas of need for more extensive professional development across Jamaica’s educational system. This narrative reports on lessons learned from a piloted assessment of the needs of Jamaican educators exploring the application of the UDL framework.

Keywords  
Universal design for learning, adaptive expertise, culturally responsive, teacher education, participatory learning, online learning, professional development

INTRODUCTION  
Exploring how the framework of UDL (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2013) can foster educator practice and facilitate student learning is key to understanding how UDL can shape pedagogical practice. Promoting educators’ development as adaptive experts who think flexibly and creatively in response to learning variability, is also important. (De Arment, Reed, & Wetzel, 2013). UDL and adaptive expertise offer a transformative framework for the development of responsive teachers who can design and deliver instruction to meet the varied needs of learners in any classroom (Reed & Smith, 2013). Through a UDL lens, educators can broaden their repertoire of instructional tools for designing rich and flexible learning environments in their classrooms (Meyer et al, 2014, Rose & Gravel, 2010, Rose & Meyer, 2002). Acknowledging current pedagogical practices and exploring new approaches allows educators to enrich their perspectives by considering the scope of learner variability, principles of UDL, and teacher practice.

BACKGROUND  
The Global UDL Virtual Classroom was designed in 2014 to build a rich and sustainable online learning community and to explore UDL and its application to educator practice in Jamaica. Using open-platforms, this online classroom design made learning visible, constructive, and applicable through online dialog, interactive demonstrations, resource curation and reflection about classroom applications and cultural appropriateness.

Through a multi-tiered online needs-assessment and collaborative design process, educators, faculty and graduate students explored core principles and critical elements of UDL. Face-to-face meetings with policy makers, university faculty, classroom teachers and other community professionals, as well as clinical faculty, were conducted in Kingston, Jamaica early in 2014 to explore feasibility for developing a UDL online community of practice. Initial plans for eight to ten participants quickly grew to thirty-four, representing Mico University College, Mico C.A.R.E. Centre at Kingston, and Mico C.A.R.E. Center at St. Ann parish. Between May through September 2014, five online modules of UDL content were designed and explored by educators to build knowledge and understanding, while ensuring cultural sensitivity in their educational settings.

The online modules were designed using Virginia Commonwealth University’s (VCU) sanctioned Wordpress platform (http://rampages.us). This platform helped educators explore core UDL principles and key concepts, identify classroom connections, and apply and pilot initial approaches and digital applications. VCU doctoral students took lead roles in co-designing the online space and curating resources applicable to educator requests. Students also gathered survey data and feedback from participating educators and group facilitators about the efficacy of the pilot modules as well as suggestions for improvement (Reed, Smith, Arnold, & Evering, 2014).

Using multiple collaborative methods over time supports the development of extensive professional development that is responsive and culturally appropriate. Faculty and doctoral students analyzed data relevant to educator themes and interests. Online comments and interviews with educators provided insightful revelations of the ways in which the UDL framework was understood, embraced and adapted into classroom practice (Reed, Arnold, Best, De Arment, & Onorato, 2014).

To illustrate the value of UDL for building knowledge about effective instruction, we explored how participating educators considered this framework as they reflect on their current educational practice. A visual analysis of all participants’ comments using the tool Wordle...
PHASE 1 RESULTS
The Global UDL Virtual Classroom pilot project demonstrated the utility and effectiveness of the UDL framework in supporting educator responsiveness to learner variability, adaptive teaching, and commitment to student success. Content analysis of participants’ responses in the modules indicated deep interest in further professional development and collaboration. Online comments showed strong support for UDL core tenets, classroom applications, and positive impact on student learning.

I am truly excited about this entire process because I can see how applicable it is to the process of learning for both myself as an educator but more so for my students who come to me varied, diverse, and all capable. By providing students with multiple means of action and expression, engagement and representation, they are able to showcase how best they learn and we get an opportunity to see just how dynamic our learners are. (One of the UDL Virtual Classroom Participants, Summer, 2014)

FOCUSING FORWARD ON NEXT STEPS
Educators and VCU leaders and participants are enthusiastic about the pilot’s outcomes and opportunities for the future. Building Jamaican leadership to infuse UDL approaches into initial teacher preparation and ongoing professional development are core tenets for the next phase of this project. Building on the success of the UDL Virtual Classroom in 2015, VCU doctoral students will continue to engage in the ongoing design and expansion of online tools to support the interests of educators and the success of their students. At the request of the educators, an online community will be created using UDL Connect (http://community.udlcenter.org) to include a “Jamaican UDL Educators” group.

Offering doctoral students opportunities to develop global expertise in personnel development using online and open-source innovations allows these future educational faculty to enrich their own pedagogical practices through the understanding and infusion of UDL.

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1. CAST’s UDL Bookbuilder is an online program for building digital books with text-rich materials that include digital scaffolds and technologies that infuse features of the core UDL principles and guidelines.
2. UDL Connect provides a free online space for designing, promoting, and developing instruction and communities of practice focused around the understanding of UDL.
REFERENCES

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