33
IMPLEMENTING UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME DRAMA EDUCATION

Molly Mattaini

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a teaching framework that creates flexible learning environments in which students with a broad range of abilities can participate. The UDL framework was first proposed in the 1990s by researchers at the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), a nonprofit educational research and development organization based near Boston. UDL’s core model asks teachers to provide multiple means of (1) engagement, (2) representation, and (3) action/expression. This means accessing multiple motivations for learning, presenting information in multiple ways, and allowing students to express their learning through multiple mediums. UDL is essential for students with disabilities but beneficial for all students, which is why UDL has become a central idea for those wishing to make inclusive educational spaces, including in drama education.

Most drama educators want to make their educational spaces inclusive, but what are the existing barriers to implementing UDL in a drama education space? UDL was first conceptualized in the US public schooling system, but many drama educators work outside the US and—most relevant to this chapter—outside of a school context. For teaching artists working outside an academic system (such as programs run by theatre companies or community centers), what are the possibilities and barriers for those teaching artists to implement UDL? How can the field both address those barriers on a systemic level and prepare teaching artists to circumnavigate those barriers so they can put UDL into practice now?

Understanding UDL

Researchers at CAST chose the phrase “universal design” to call upon architectural standards that make spaces physically accessible from the design’s inception. The classic example of architectural universal design is curb cuts, which are inexpensive to build into a design but expensive to retrofit later. Curb cuts are necessary for pedestrians using mobility devices while also being beneficial for others, such as people pushing shopping carts or strollers. UDL applies this idea to curriculum design: creating a lesson from the ground up with multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression is necessary for some students and beneficial for all. However, the term “universal” is somewhat misleading here, because UDL is “universal” only to the specific learners within a real classroom. It is next to impossible to create a curriculum that will work for all theoretical learners—because
sometimes access needs conflict with one another—but it is possible to create one that is accessible to all the learners in one classroom, and to cultivate a mindset that makes differentiation foundational to pedagogical design.

Building on the principles of UDL, Alice Udvari-Solner, Richard A. Villa, and Jennifer S. Thousand proposed a process for implementing UDL as a “systematic decision-making method for differentiation” (137). To introduce their systemic process, I will here break down its parts by replicating an activity I give my students on the first day of the course Drama for Teaching and Learning at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (Figure 33.1).

Students are given the below placards and asked to sort them twice, in response to the following prompts:

1. How are these arranged in the current schooling system?
2. How should they be arranged in an ideal schooling system?

Generally, in answer to the first question, students place Acceptable Evidence at the top of the hierarchy, citing passing tests and obtaining a diploma as the ultimate goals of the current education system. When asked the second question, they often give primacy to Facts about Your Students or Enduring Questions and Central Understandings, citing these elements as most important to their own learning. The instincts of these students align with the process put forward by Udvari-Solner et al. for implementing UDL.

The UDL process asks first “Who am I teaching?” rather than “What or how do I want to teach?” In a traditional lesson plan, a teacher decides the learning outcomes, the activities, and how knowledge will be demonstrated first. At the end of the process, they might add accommodations for students with disabilities. The UDL process puts this final step at the beginning of the process. Based on who is being taught, the enduring understandings underpinning the lesson remain the same, but ways of accessing and demonstrating that enduring understanding are individualized. In this way, students of differing abilities can engage with the same core ideas (Figure 33.2).

![Figure 33.1 Placards with six pedagogical design elements: Acceptable Evidence, Products, Process, Content, Facts about your Students, and Enduring Questions and Central Understanding](image-url)
In my personal experience, this model looked less than revolutionary until I was asked to implement it as a working teaching artist. My inspiration for a lesson could come from any one of these pedagogical design elements. I never stopped myself from planning before getting to know my students. Planning a lesson and then adjusting to fit the students who enrolled was a positive step toward inclusion, but it was not UDL. It was adaptation of a model that was designed toward an imagined norm.

When I was challenged to take a UDL approach, my pedagogical design process began to evolve—but I encountered multiple barriers to embracing this approach. While a myriad of obstacles to implementing UDL exist in a typical classroom, many of the barriers I observed as a teaching artist came from the mismatch between the context in which UDL was first conceptualized—US public schools—and the context in which I often teach—Out-of-School Time (OST) drama education.

Applying UDL to OST drama education

In a US public school, administrators and educators are accountable to a state board of education, which, in turn, is accountable to the federal Department of Education. This public education system has long been criticized for being overly outcomes-focused due to standardized testing, which can often work counter to the legal requirements for inclusion of students with disabilities. Standardized tests measure all students based on the same expectations, reduce the complex facets of learning into simple quantitative measures, and offer fixed outcomes of learning. Some teachers, administrators, and activists have successfully pushed against standardization by framing inclusion as an issue of right to belong to a community, bolstered by a legal mandate to educate all students within their community.
OST drama contexts—community programs that offer drama classes and low-stakes performance opportunities to children anywhere from pre-K to high-school age—do not share the obstacle of standardization, but they also do not share a mandate to educate each student in their community. Administrators of these programs might endeavor to make their programming accessible, but ultimately families must self-select enrollment into these activities. Simply not enrolling a student or removing a disruptive student is always an available option, so students with significant disabilities are often unconsciously left out of this programming. Rights to inclusion do not factor into enrollment decisions despite the potential for flexibility in these spaces.

In addition, the accountability structure of OST drama education is often synonymous with marketability. Typically, an organization markets classes to the parent-consumer: parents or caretakers who have the purchasing power to enroll their child in a class. The parent enters the transaction with an expectation that their child’s learning will be demonstrated back to them, proving that they bought a valuable good. This model presents multiple limitations to implementing a UDL process, including limited information about students before a class begins and limited demonstration of knowledge to parent-consumers at the conclusion of a curriculum.

First, many OST programs have limited access to information about students. In a school setting, teachers have the benefit of not only an entire academic year to get to know their students but also access to information collected by previous classroom teachers. Many people debate the utility of the information documented in student dossiers, but in theory classroom teachers can think about UDL from the first day of curriculum design. This is not the case for most OST teaching artists. Their information is limited to what parents consider necessary to include on a sign-up for a recreational activity. Providing detailed information is a barrier for parents—it can be time-consuming and emotionally draining, and is a step that typical families have the privilege to skip. Parents of a child with a disability may also intentionally leave out information about ability because they fear their child will be unduly limited and segregated once they have disclosed this information.

Second, this structure puts pressure on a demonstration of learning. While drama educators are invested in the process of learning, the program is accountable to parent-consumers rather than a board of education, and therefore must offer some form of proof to the customers that they received a good from their purchase. A final performance is often built into the design of the program, making full UDL difficult because this assessment is fixed. Some organizations use the term “sharing” deliberately to expand final assessment beyond a typical “performance,” but even in those cases, there is an assumption that parents will consume a product at the end of the class or camp (and, in reality, this product is usually a performance).

These limitations are frustrating because the flexibility and creativity of a drama classroom fits UDL. The active and creative nature of drama education makes it inherently more compatible with multiple means of engagement, representation, and action-expression. Many drama educators and OST programs prioritize the educational process over the theatrical product: the goal is the long-term development of the student rather than a polished performance. Parents are likewise most invested in their child’s development and should therefore be natural allies in UDL. The issue is that parents and students alike do not know how to evaluate drama goals outside of seeing or participating in performance.

I propose that holistic solutions call for more collaboration between parents, administrators, and teaching artists. To gather facts about students, administrators must remove barriers to information sharing about students, while teaching artists must engage in a process of information collecting as part of their pedagogical design process. To place primacy on
enduring questions and central understandings, administrators must make the value of a theatrical experience transparent to the parents making the enrollment decisions (without expecting a performance), and teaching artists must plan flexible drama units in which the students determine the learning outcomes.

**Mentoring future teaching artists**

As an instructor of Drama for Teaching and Learning, I’ve begun experimenting with methods for emerging teaching artists to circumvent the typical parent-consumer model. The course, designed by and taught under the mentorship of Professor Manon van de Water, teaches undergraduate students about drama education methods and philosophies through practice. Students design and implement drama lessons for K–2 students, known as “Little Buddies,” who regularly visit the class, as well as lessons for older students that they practice with one another. The course heavily emphasizes metacognition, asking students to reflect daily on their work in class and in depth after implementing lesson plans.

During the time I taught this course, I integrated the UDL process into the existing metacognitive emphasis. This began with the above activity of sorting the six elements of pedagogical design, and was returned to throughout the undergraduates’ lesson planning process. After their first meeting with the Little Buddies, I facilitated a group reflection that started not with thoughts on the lesson itself but with observations of the Little Buddies, both as a group and as individuals. While this falls short of a detailed dossier, it cultivates a mindset in the emerging teachers of seeing the initial interaction with the student as an information-gathering process. When later designing lessons, I encouraged the undergraduates to consider what they already knew of the Little Buddies before thinking through the various content, processes, and products that might engage students in the enduring question or central understanding that guides their lesson. While this context is specific, any working teaching artist can implement these tactics.

Considering the processes explored in Drama for Teaching and Learning, there is great potential in the drama education field to make our classrooms radically accessible to students with disabilities. By systematically collecting information about our students and aligning all stakeholders with the enduring understandings that underpin our curricula, we can make all students equal members of our classroom communities.

**References**
