Universal Design for Learning for the Expository Reading and Writing Curriculum: Pedagogy and Practice for Teachers

By Ginny Crisco

What is Universal Design for Learning?

"Disability exists in the curriculum and the environment not necessarily in the learner" (Meyer, Rose, and Gordon 66).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a research-informed theory and pedagogy for addressing the diverse needs of learners in the classroom. *Universal Design* is a concept from architecture where the purpose is to create spaces accessible for all (e.g., ramps instead of stairs; braille and text for signage; open, clutter free spaces for mobility). UDL builds from the theory of Universal Design and applies it to the classroom and to pedagogy. While UDL has emerged from researching and teaching students with disabilities, researchers and teachers of UDL have found that it actually works for all students, and they have thus constructed a theory and pedagogy that addresses the broad and diverse range of learner needs in a classroom. UDL is not just for special education teachers; it is a pedagogy designed for use by all teachers and for implementation with all students.

Kevin Schafaer, from the *English Language Arts/English Language Development (ELA/ELD) Framework* Launch, "Chapter 9 Access and Equity," sums up the differences between UDL and other kinds of curriculum:

- One size does not fit all—but **alternatives for everyone**

- Not added on later—but **designed from the beginning**

- Not access for some—but **access for everyone**

- Diversity is the **norm**

- Technology is **flexible** and **accessible**

- **First focus on the curriculum**—goals, assessments, methods, materials—then on individual students.

At its core, UDL advocates for a strong link between the expert learner and a flexible, accessible, and challenging curriculum. Expert learning is about having strategies for managing information and processes, and reflective opportunities for transfer of learning. It is about sustaining interest and being able to organize work processes. It is about having a sense of confidence and the ability to take risks and keep at something that is difficult or boring. The means for cultivating the expert learner are through creating a flexible, accessible, and challenging curriculum that attends to these three areas: engagement, representation, and action and expression.

Who Benefits from Universal Design for Learning?

CLEARING A PATH
FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS
CLEARS THE PATH FOR EVERYONE!

A theoretical and pedagogical approach for addressing the range of students needs in a classroom is vital to addressing the broad range of students found in California classrooms. UDL is designed for all students. According to Chapter 9 of the *ELA/ELD Framework* entitled "Access and Equity," the diversity of students in California include the following:

- Standard English Learners

- African American English Speakers

- Chicano/a English Speakers

- English Learners

- Reclassified English Proficient Students

- Biliterate Students

- Students Who Are Deaf and Bilingual in ASL and Printed English

- Student Who Are Deaf and Hard of Hearing Who Communicate with Spoken English or Simultaneous Communication, Including Sign Supported Speech

- Students Living in Poverty

- Migrant Students

- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students

- Advanced Learners

- Students with Disabilities

- Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

- Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities (882-908)

Because of this diversity, teachers need to consider—and surely already know and experience—that diversity is the norm in all California classrooms. But more importantly, the theory and pedagogy of UDL suggest that the general education teacher can meet all the needs of his or her diverse student population by following the UDL guidelines and planning curriculum according to the variety of learners that are already there. Shelley Moore in "Transforming Inclusive Education" uses bowling as a metaphor for the ways teachers need to address students and learning: Often we focus on the head pins, the students who are average, who are in the middle. Instead, she argues from her interview with a professional bowler, that the way to knock down the most number of pins—the way to get to the most number of students—is to focus on the pins/students that are hardest to get. Moore's metaphor points to the ways that focusing on the top performing and the lowest performing students will get all of the students in between.

Designing and Planning for a Variety of Learners

The research on UDL has found that there is a natural variety of learners in any one classroom. Rather than planning for the "average" student, or even a specific student, ERWC teachers can plan for the students who are the most challenging to teach, both those who are high performing and those who are struggling. In contrast to Differentiated Instruction which focuses on retrofitting curriculum for individual circumstances and learners, UDL focuses on building accessibility into the curriculum in advance and is designed for all learners.

Key to this kind of planning is building in choices for students to be able to access the curriculum—choices that are built on the UDL Guidelines and provide multiple means of representation, action and expression, and motivation. In addition to these considerations, Thousand, Villa, and Nevin argue for

- Paying attention to the materials being used in a lesson, making sure that the materials are both multilevel and multisensory, as different kinds of materials can foster better engagement

- Considering the range of mastery for students by creating multilevel goals that account for a range of complexity within the same goal

- Creating multilevel and authentic assessments where students perform what they know and represent realistic learning, such as through the use of portfolios or learning contracts

- Considering the process for learning by varying how students take part in learning, considering instructional groupings, using instructional strategies informed by Multiple

Intelligence theories, and considering the classroom climate or social/physical environment situation

The key to this work is paying attention to the variety of ways teachers provide access to students to learn, represent, and engage.

Focus on the Expert Learner

While a significant portion of our job is to teach students how to be better readers and writers, we also need to support students, particularly students who are struggling, to be good students. This is where the expert learner piece becomes significant. Students need to learn strategies and habits of mind that will help them create personal goals for learning and have effective strategies to meet those goals. They need to have strategies for engaging in unfamiliar or boring material, and they need processes and practices to persist through challenges. They need to be able to assess what they have learned, so they can cultivate a sense of self-efficacy that will then support them in creating better learning goals as well as giving them a more situated sense of motivation and persistence.

The research in educational psychology, particularly scholarship on the "growth mindset" from which the expert learner ideas have emerged, has made the difference in performance for students who are the most vulnerable (students of color, from underrepresented backgrounds in the institution, etc.), which is vital to our work. The growth mindset is the attitude that all students can learn, that the best kinds of performances are the ones where students tried their best and took risks, where the most important outcome is not to be right but to go beyond what one knows.

In "The Power of Believing You Can Improve," for example, Carol Dweck discusses her research with African American and Native American students who were the lowest in their districts who, particularly in the case of the Native American students living on a reservation, were able to outperform their more affluent peers (peers who were children of Microsoft workers) just by teachers shifting their practice to include the growth mindset along with content (the more affluent peers were only taught content). Now, to be fair, this research was done in elementary school and focused specifically on math, but the kind of work that supports expert learners connects to current research in composition pedagogy as well, such as the research on the writing process, on the importance of students being able to assess their abilities as readers and writers, as well as the research on transfer of learning.

Some time should be spent in class fostering expert learning practices as a way to build content knowledge. The assignment template marks places where expert learning should be included.

- Creating Reading and Writing Learning Goals: This is a place for teachers to articulate their goals for learning to students, and this is a place for students to create their own learning goals. The articulation of learning goals by teachers is a key place for students to see the relevance of what they are learning as well as a place for teachers to suggest that there is a larger picture—one that is not just associated with state standards or institutional requirements, or even college and career readiness standards. For students, this is a place for them to start thinking about those habits of mind, those opportunities for buy in and

motivation, and those long-term goals that these smaller goals can help them reach. It can also be a place where students plan how to meet those goals and brainstorm strategies for how to address roadblocks.

- Reflecting on Reading and Writing Processes: Students should practice assessing what they have learned or are learning to cultivate self-efficacy, which is somewhat akin to students' sense of confidence about themselves as readers and writers. Through students' reflection on their abilities with reading and writing, they can also be set up for positive transfer of learning, what Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak call "remix" and "critical incidents": "Remix" is "integrating new knowledge into the schema of the old" (112) and "critical incident" is "a failure to meet a new task successfully—and use that occasion as a prompt to rethink writing altogether" (112). Again, this can be an opportunity for students to assess what they know or have learned, reflect on how they have met the goals they have set out for themselves, and discuss the strategies they have used to address challenges or blocks to their progress.

Cultivating expert learners can also happen in those places where we as teachers want to help students learn how to be good students. It creates a mindset in the classroom that all students can learn. It limits the role that labels or behavior places on students and their abilities, and it helps students consider, for example, how well they complete their work, how they contribute to group conversations, how well they are able to understand a text, how well they are able to write a text, what practices or strategies they have for getting work done, what strategies they have for addressing challenges, what tools they have for access and representation, and how they can engage with texts and projects even when it is difficult. Cultivating expert learners is as simple as having students reflect on their work habits and strategies, or encouraging them to set goals for their learning, or helping them plan how to complete a project and assess their work efforts. UDL takes the qualities of expert learners and considers what educational practices need to be put in place to lead toward the development of expert learners.

Universal Design for Learning Guidelines

Key to UDL is the inclusion of choices to address the different areas of cognition that support cultivating expert learners, but doing so can also be a challenge for students who are not average. The researchers at CAST have proposed the guidelines on the following page as a way to account for the range of learners in a classroom, the needs of those learners to engage in the materials, and the practices for cultivating expert learners. The guidelines demonstrate options for creating accessible, flexible, and challenging curriculum.

The UDL guidelines apply to the teaching of rhetorical reading and writing in the ERWC curriculum in these ways:

- Provide Multiple Means of Representation, which includes how students perceive information; how students understand language, expressions, and symbols; and how students comprehend information (CAST). What this looks like in the ERWC classroom is that texts students read can be read with technology that, for example, can read it aloud, or students can use technology for translation. Other means of representation can include visual media or drama to support understanding, outlines of key or big ideas, graphic organizers to help students see relationships between ideas.

The Universal Design for Learning Guidelines

CAST | Until learning has no limits™

	Provide multiple means of **Engagement**	Provide multiple means of **Representation**	Provide multiple means of **Action & Expression**
	Affective Networks The "WHY" of Learning	Recognition Networks The "WHAT" of Learning	Strategic Networks The "HOW" of Learning
Access	Provide options for **Recruiting Interest** • Optimize individual choice and autonomy • Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity • Minimize threats and distractions	Provide options for **Perception** • Offer ways of customizing the display of information • Offer alternatives for auditory information • Offer alternatives for visual information	Provide options for **Physical Action** • Vary the methods for response and navigation • Optimize access to tools and assistive technologies
Build	Provide options for **Sustaining Effort & Persistence** • Heighten salience of goals and objectives • Vary demands and resources to optimize challenge • Foster collaboration and community • Increase mastery-oriented feedback	Provide options for **Language & Symbols** • Clarify vocabulary and symbols • Clarify syntax and structure • Support decoding of text, mathematical notation, and symbols • Promote understanding across languages • Illustrate through multiple media	Provide options for **Expression & Communication** • Use multiple media for communication • Use multiple tools for construction and composition • Build fluencies with graduated levels of support for practice and performance
Internalize	Provide options for **Self Regulation** • Promote expectations and beliefs that optimize motivation • Facilitate personal coping skills and strategies • Develop self-assessment and reflection	Provide options for **Comprehension** • Activate or supply background knowledge • Highlight patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships • Guide information processing and visualization • Maximize transfer and generalization	Provide options for **Executive Functions** • Guide appropriate goal-setting • Support planning and strategy development • Facilitate managing information and resources • Enhance capacity for monitoring progress
Goal	**Expert learners** who are... **Purposeful & Motivated**	**Resourceful & Knowledgeable**	**Strategic & Goal-Directed**

- Provide Multiple Means of Action and Expression, which includes physical action such as access to tools and technology; the use of multimedia or other tools for communication and construction and to build fluency; as well as goal setting, planning, and strategy development, managing information and monitoring progress (CAST). For the ERWC classroom, this can simply mean allowing students to do more than just write with text. It means being open to different ways that students can demonstrate their learning, through oral presentation, visual images, multimedia texts, and standard writing projects. It can also mean helping students to be aware of their processes for work, their strategies to complete that work, and their ability to reflect on or assess their work as they move into new kinds of literacy tasks.

- Provide Multiple Means of Engagement, which includes getting students interested in the topic or choosing topics of interest to students, helping students to sustain their effort and develop persistence, and cultivate abilities to self-regulate (CAST). For the ERWC classroom, this means helping students to access prior knowledge, choosing topics and tasks that are interesting and relevant to them (i.e., using real world examples and problems and creating real world products), helping them to develop strategies to go deeper into their learning, and helping them to assess their abilities as readers and writers.

Applying and Going Beyond the Assignment Template

For ERWC teachers, the Assignment Template naturally breaks reading and writing down into particular steps to provide support and scaffolding for students who need it. The Assignment Template values engaging students and recruiting interest, supports students at a range of levels, and encourages students to create goals and reflect on those goals to cultivate themselves as expert learners. In addition to the ways the assignment template breaks down learning to read and write, teachers can incorporate UDL practices in the following ways.

General Classroom Supports

- Provide Multisensory Options*:* Consider visual, aural, kinesthetic, and tactile information as a way to recruit interest, to support meaning making, and to encourage students to use to represent their learning. Always try to create an audio component and ask yourself how a student who is blind might access the curriculum, and always try to create a visual component and ask yourself how a student who is deaf might access the material. Also provide digital copies of lessons, so students can access them and follow along on a tablet or laptop.

- Offer Choices via Self-Assessment and Planning*:* Whenever possible, give students a range of choices to address ability levels, sensory and cognitive needs, and individual-social perception of abilities, so they can find success and have agency in their learning. The goal is not to give students choices that are always the easiest for them; students have to be taught how to make good choices and to challenge themselves. Instead, it is important to cultivate the growth mindset in the class, help students cultivate their own goals for learning in relation to the goals the teacher and the state have, help students assess what they already

know how to do, and then help students make informed choices based on what their goals and yours are.

- Include Collaborative Learning: Asking students to work collaboratively with other students on intellectual tasks is a powerful way to build language, literacy, and engage them in learning. Collaboration—both brief and extended—can happen at many points across a module as students discuss questions, conduct research, compose texts, and evaluate each other's writing. Most importantly, for collaborative learning to be meaningful, students need to have a sense of what Fisher and Frey in *Better Learning through Structured Teaching* call "positive interdependence"—that is, "each member of the group must be important for the overall success of the endeavor" (66). This means that the kind of collaborative work that students are given must draw on each of the group members as resources and help them to create a product that they would not have been able to create independently.

- Provide Scaffolds and Supports: Provide scaffolds and supports for students to go deeper and to also access the curriculum. For example, some students might need sentence frames, outlines of key ideas from the readings, summaries or visual representations of readings, or tasks broken down into small and/or fewer number of steps. High-performing students might need scaffolds and supports for engaging with ideas at a higher level or learning more about a particular topic. All students need rubrics, checklists, sample student work, and mentor texts in order to understand what is expected of them.

- Use Technology: Technology can engage students, give them a medium they are familiar with to conduct communication and representation of their ideas, and support students to access the curriculum because of its inherent multisensory nature. Useful to the ERWC classroom would be technology that reads texts aloud, translates texts, uses word prediction software, provides options for annotating and responding to texts, helps students manage notes and keep track of research, etc.

Reading

- Prepare Students for a Reading: Help students understand what they know about the topic before they read. Consider what information they need, such as key terms or concepts, or an outline, or an opportunity to create their own reading goals to understand the text. Consider how to guide them in their reading so they know what to pay attention to and can prepare for discussion.

- Teach Students to Assess Their Abilities with a Reading: It is important for students to know how we make meaning from a reading, how that meaning-making can be enhanced through collaboration, and what different levels of reading ability there are, so they can assess themselves. For example, students need to control the literal meaning of a text before they can move to the interpretive and the analytical. If students know how to assess their reading abilities, they can make choices about what kind of supports they need or how they can choose more challenging tasks with reading.

- Consider Choices for Reading:

  - If students need to read the same text, think about ways the text can be enhanced for high performing students (by asking them more challenging reading questions or having them do supplemental research) and how it can be modified for EL or students with disabilities (by incorporating more visuals, giving them opportunities through software applications to have the text read to them or have parts of it translated, or by modifying the text into simpler sentences or highlighting key passages, phrases, or concepts in the text).

  - If students don't have to read the same text, consider how different texts might be simpler and more challenging so these texts can introduce all students to similar concepts and/ or practices but do this at their own level and with their own interests in mind. Students need to be guided to make the best choice to challenge themselves; otherwise, they will default to the only way they know how to choose: what is easiest or has the lowest number of pages.

- Provide Supplements to the Reading: This could include more reading or information about the topic. It could include a list of key terms and their definitions, an outline of the reading for note taking, or videos or images to enhance understanding of a reading. It could include making connections between key ideas or concepts visible. It also could include targeted opportunities to reflect on their learning as they read or opportunities to dig deeper for implications, and so on. For an example, see "Ray's Lesson: High School English" at blog.brookespublishing.com/6-steps-to-planning-udl-lessons-3-teacher-stories/.

Writing/Representation of Learning

- Prepare Students for Writing: Before students even get a formal writing assignment, have them practice low stakes writing: brainstorming, reflection, response, generating thoughts, keeping track, and just generally, writing that doesn't have to be read by anyone else. Then, when students are given the formal assignment, they have a lot of writing they have already done on the topic and have developed fluency through practicing writing throughout a module, semester, or year.

- Give Students Choices in Writing/Representation:

  - If the goal of the learning is not directly tied to a text, allow students to use different methods for representation: images, presentations, drawings, art work, writing, drama, etc. It's important for students to have multisensory options with each assignment and for them to engage with representation in a variety of ways.

  - If the goal of learning is tied to a text, teach them how they have options within a writing assignment. Understanding that your goal is to teach writing, have students focus on meeting that goal. For example, they could outline key claims to an argument, they could find their own evidence for an argument, or they could include more analysis and explanation for an idea they have in writing. But teachers can also provide frames for organizing a text as well as sentence starters for key pieces of a text.

- Create Materials for More Support and More Challenge: For example, provide hints or tips for addressing a challenge in writing, such as a tips page with strategies for developing ideas or selecting quotes. Help students organize information by giving them ways to keep track of their research. Provide opportunities for students to reflect on their process or give students options for digging deeper or going beyond the minimum expectations of their writing and/or representation.

Processes are about reading and writing, making meaning from and with texts, and planning processes, as well as reflecting on the quality of process.

- Find Opportunities to Help Students Plan and Set Goals for Their Reading and Writing Processes: Consider how and why they would want to sustain these processes and reflect on the labor of these processes with an eye toward the next iteration. Help them think about what would happen if they faced a challenge and how they might overcome those challenges to reach their goals.

- Help Students Cultivate Persistence Through Difficult Tasks: Help students address challenges in their writing, such as writer's block, or help them see the benefit of reading a text multiple times by emphasizing how they can read like a learner by highlighting key ideas and passages. Help students learn to read like a writer by focusing on the author's textual moves and learn to read like a researcher by taking and reviewing notes and seeking key information to integrate into written texts.

- Teach Students How to Use Feedback to Improve: Particularly if students have never been expected to revise, it is important to model for them how this works. This might mean helping students plan for how to use feedback. It could be about showing examples of how particular kinds of feedback were used or it could be about making expectations for revision explicit.

Assessment is about the students being able to evaluate their own and other's work. Moreover, it emphasizes their ability to apply concepts of reading and writing discussed in the class to the quality or processes of their work.

- Teach Students How to Assess Their Own Writing: This means helping students gauge where they are in the process of writing, request the kind of feedback they need or want for peer review, assess the quality of their writing, apply rubric categories, and strategize how to use feedback to address their own purposes for communication.

- Teach Students How To Assess Other's Writing: Help students recognize the importance and value of being a part of a community of writers, make the reading of writing a key practice of being a writer, and give them lots of practice reading and responding to other's writing. Encourage students to learn the language of writing and learn to see rhetorical moves, so they can provide suggestions for revision and assess the quality of those moves.

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