



Take a look around any public school classroom today and you will notice one thing they all have in common: *diversity*. Today's classrooms have students of varying race, ethnicity, economic status, religion, gender, disability, etc.

Now imagine a different form of diversity, one that is not visible from outward appearances but that is

completely different from one student to the next. The greatest diversity in today's classrooms has always existed but has not been widely recognized: it is the diversity in the way we learn.

Modern neuroscience and brain research tells us that the way we learn is as unique as our fingerprints and just like no two people have the same fingerprints, no two people learn in exactly the same way. So how can teachers possibly meet the

learning needs of all the students in their classrooms? One particular tool for teachers to take advantage of is called Universal Design for Learning.

Universal Design for Learning was developed by CAST (the Center for Applied Special Technology), a nonprofit research and development organization in Massachusetts that works to expand learning opportunities for all individuals. The basis for the framework comes from the



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REMOVING LEARNING BARRIERS

Universal Design for Learning
makes knowledge accessible
for all different learners

Jolene Troia

concept of universal design in architecture where buildings are proactively designed to meet the needs of the broadest range of users. Examples of this are things like curb cut outs in sidewalks or automatic faucets, which have specific benefits to certain populations, but also have benefits for the greater population and are commonly used by everyone. Universal Design for Learning takes this concept from architecture and applies it to the world of education.

Universal Design for Learning is based on three learning networks in the brain:

- 1. Recognition Network.** The “What” of learning — how students gather facts and categorize what they see, hear, and read such as identifying letters, words, or an author’s style.
- 2. Strategic Network.** The “How” of learning — how students organize and express their ideas such as writing an essay or solving a math problem.

- 3. Affective Network.** The “Why” of learning — how students get engaged, stay motivated, are challenged, excited, or interested.

Universal Design for Learning in Wisconsin can be defined as a “scientifically valid framework that provides multiple means of access, assessment, and engagement and removes barriers in instruction to achieve academic and behavioral success for all.” The three main principles of Universal Design for Learning as developed by CAST according to the three learning networks in the brain are:

- 1. Provide Multiple Means of Representation** — such as having audio books or eBooks available in addition to print versions.
- 2. Provide Multiple Means of Action and Expression** — for instance, making choices available at the end of a unit for students to show what they’ve



learned, such as creating a video, making a poster, giving a presentation, etc.

- 3. Provide Multiple Means of Engagement** — for example, using Google Earth to explore a region versus a map in a textbook, or going on a virtual field trip of the Arctic instead of just reading about it (see figure on page 7).

In Wisconsin, Universal Design for Learning is in the beginning stages. Informal data gathered on educator familiarity showed that about 65 percent of Wisconsin educators rated themselves at the beginner level, 30 percent at the intermediate level and only 5 percent rated themselves as advanced in familiarity to Universal Design for Learning.

Many schools and districts have been investigating the framework and attending overview trainings

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held by the Department of Public Instruction/Wisconsin RtI Center in various locations around the state. During the training, participants gain background knowledge of Universal Design for Learning, explore the various framework components, discover resources to utilize and take back to their districts, and find out about next steps towards integration and implementation. Over 230 educators, coaches and administrators from over 33 districts have attended trainings so far. In addition, the trainings were offered to pre-service student teachers at no cost. With plans to repeat these overviews during the 2014-15 school year in different locations around the state, it is fair to say that the Universal Design for Learning wheels are turning.

The Department of Public Instruction views Universal Design for Learning as a critical part of the planning and development of resources around standards implementation, assessments, and instructional practices and has included it in the state's Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) waiver. The goal at the department is to integrate the concepts and principles of Universal Design for Learning into all facets of work coming from the department. A team of consultants from various divisions and teams at the agency meet on a regular basis, discussing various topics around Universal Design for Learning. In addition, the department has a group of outside stakeholders that also meet several times a year for strategic planning.

The agency uses representatives from CAST to help with this statewide implementation process. CAST research suggests that it takes at least five to seven years for full implementation of Universal Design for Learning.

The benefits for students are easy to understand. However, there are many benefits for teachers as well. Most importantly, Universal Design for Learning ties together many of the educational reform efforts that are going on in Wisconsin. In fact, sometimes Universal Design for Learning is referred to as the "intersection of initia-



Universal Design for Learning in Action

A look at how the Oconomowoc Area School District began implementing Universal Design for Learning in its classrooms this school year

For the past year, the Oconomowoc Area School District (OASD) has begun work to bring a Universal Design for Learning framework into its schools. Kimberly Schiefelbein, facilitator of teaching and learning and the district Universal Design for Learning coach, said school leaders believe the framework can help students reach the next level.

"We want to represent, assess, and engage students in the ways they learn best from the beginning," she said. "With Universal Design for Learning, the idea is that when planning lessons and delivering curriculum, we plan with all students in mind: various learning styles, social diversity, disabilities, strengths, and removal of barriers. It also includes consideration of physical environment and social and emotional factors."

OASD has been in the "Explore phase" of Universal Design for Learning this past school year. This has involved professional development time, district-level coaching, principal leadership, and storytelling from teachers, focused on implementation.

"Storytelling from our teachers about student engagement and impact is proving to have the most powerful influence," Schiefelbein said. "We started by celebrating all of the

positive and effective strategies our teachers currently use and built off of that."

The district is preparing for the next stage which is district-wide implementation. School leaders at OASD are learning there is no one correct way to implement Universal Design for Learning. Each school and each educator has to find what works for them and their students.

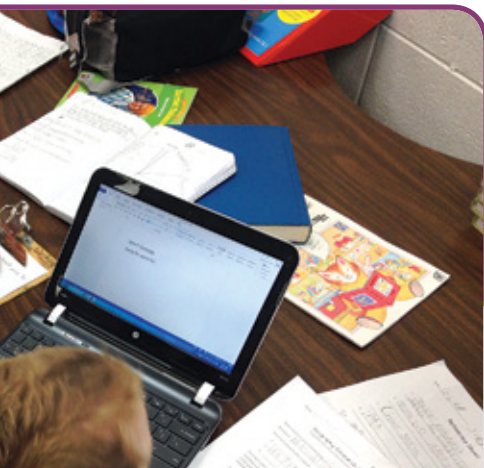
"Each district has to find their own way and that is where we are now, finding our way," Schiefelbein said.

This school year, the Universal Design for Learning framework has been piloted in many OASD classrooms and is already changing the way educators in the district represent instruction, engage for optimal learning, and assess students. Teachers are even changing their physical environment of the classroom to better meet the needs of students.

"One of our elementary schools is starting a pilot project where they are literally tearing down walls and redefining what a learning environment looks like," Schiefelbein said.

At OASD, implementation of Universal Design for Learning has involved teachers and staff in the classrooms as well as

tives.” It has connections to the Common Core State Standards, the new Educator Effectiveness systems in Wisconsin, RtI, PBIS, Culturally Responsive Practices, Personalized Learning, new state assessments, and the list goes on. Teachers should not view Universal Design for Learning as one more thing being thrown their way, but as a tool to incorporate all facets of good teaching and a way to achieve many of the new requirements placed upon them. It can be referred to as the “How” that so many teachers are struggling to find in education today.

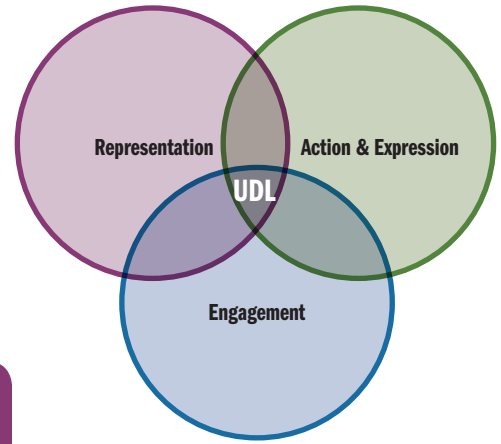


administration and school board members who make curriculum decisions. Additionally, the district has learned that Universal Design for Learning implementation is a recursive and continuous cycle — always changing and improving and adjusting to student needs.

For the classrooms that have been trying Universal Design for Learning, Schiefelbein said the early reviews have been positive.

“Teachers report that students are more motivated than ever before to learn and sustain that interest throughout units when Universal Design for Learning is used,” she said. “When given instruction in a manner that speaks to them as a learner, and being allowed to have choices in how they demonstrate what they know, and removal of barriers, students excel.” □

Universal Design for Learning does not just apply to K-12 education. There is language in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 around Universal Design for Learning as it applies to post-



UDL Principles

Providing multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement in the classroom are the three main principles of Universal Design for Learning.

Learn More About UDL

Here are some resources to help you further explore Universal Design for Learning.

■ National Center on Universal Design for Learning
udcenter.org

■ Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST)
cast.org

■ Maryland Learning Links
marylandlearninglinks.org/950

■ Free technology toolkit for Universal Design for Learning
udltechtoolkit.wikispaces.com

■ Interactive Universal Design for Learning wheel
udlwheel.mdonlinegrants.org

secondary education. This includes post-secondary staff using teaching methods and strategies consistent with Universal Design for Learning in an effort to make education as accessible as possible to a variety of students, as well as language pertaining to teacher preparation programs that includes it as part of their reform implementation. ■

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