Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning is a method of planning for instruction that seeks to help educators create lessons that all students can be successful in. Instead of presenting material in one way, and expecting students to produce a specific result, teachers should offer lessons with as many ways to access information as possible, and to allow students to demonstrate their learning in as many ways as possible.

The TEDx talk on the Myth of Average was very powerful to me in beginning my understanding of this process. The idea that no one is average, and to teach to the average teaches no one caused a bit of an epiphany for me. I connect with that idea because I do my best learning by talking through topics with people, but struggle to retain information through lectures. During my undergrad, I was fortunate to have a number of history professors who had discussion as a major component of our learning. It was also my most effective way of studying for exams – getting together with classmates to discuss material. Had the information been presented simply as a lecture, I likely wouldn’t have found the success I did in History.

As a teacher on call, I see this in classrooms that I visit on regular basis. Teachers that have rigid assignments for their students have the same list of students with unfinished work week after week. When students are expected to show their learning in a single way, the ones that this works for will succeed, and those that it doesn’t will flounder. Alternately, I see high school classrooms working on projects where the method of delivering their assignment is left almost completely open to them. Work in a group or alone, present orally, on a computer, in a poster, in a dance; however you can to get your point across. The students in the rigid classroom where less motivated to complete assignments, and seemed to be going through the motions, rather than being actively engaged in their work. The students with more choice seemed more passionate about their projects.

In planning lessons, for me to prescribe to the UDL framework, I need to present my material in as many ways as possible. That means that I will offer visual, oral, and when appropriate tactile representations of what I am teaching. An example of this is teaching shapes to a K/1 class. In presenting a new shape, a Square, I explain a square using the language we establish, that it has 4 equal sides and 4 vertices, I will show students a picture of it on our Elmo, I will have them explore the classroom looking for squares, and I will have them use squares in conjunction with our other pattern blocks to offer them a chance to use squares. Their assignment, creating a book about squares, asks them to draw a square, write the word square, and then to come talk to me about their book. In presenting material this way, I give learners a chance to see information in as many ways as possible, and when showing what they know, they come to work with me one on one and either read their books to me, or explain their knowledge by showing me their books and what they have created.

The most powerful takeaway from learning about UDL has been making learning and demonstrating knowledge inclusive. Students, with the proper tools, can be successful in all areas. There is no average or typical, so for me to expect a student to be able to show their learning in one typical way, I am limiting my students from finding success in school. By assuming no one is typical, I offer my students the greatest opportunity to be successful.