

Article Critique: Universal Design for Learning

Scott D. Fulton

Master of Education, Vancouver Island University

MEDS 510: Introduction to Special Education

Dr. Bob Eslinger

July 11th, 2021

With respectful acknowledgement that Vancouver Island University is located on the unceded traditional territories of the Coast Salish Peoples. This paper was written and submitted from treaty 4 territory. As a treaty relative, I pay my respects to the Earth, the First Nations, and all of the original inhabitants of these lands in which I humbly conduct this research.

Barteaux S. (2014). Universal design for learning. *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, 6(2), 50-54. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1230738>

In this article, Susan Barteaux, a grade three teacher from Carberry Manitoba, demonstrates an understanding of what Universal Design for Learning (UDL) encompasses along with some basic concepts and definitions that provide a framework for what this would look like in any classroom. She does this by seamlessly referencing a long list of books and journal articles from well-known authors with whom I am already familiar, including Jennifer Katz, Doug Willms, the National Centre for Learning Disabilities, and the National Centre on Universal Design for Learning. I found this article by simply searching “Universal Design for Learning” as it is always important for me to start with a big picture perspective when I begin my research. I appreciated that this four-page overview of the framework referenced supporting literature and provided a great example of a published student paper. More importantly, it validated for me what the framework for UDL should look like as I strive towards researching and designing practical applications in my role as a Transitions Teacher with Prairie Valley School Division this fall.

In her abstract, Barteaux (2014, p. 50) defines UDL as

. . . a framework for instruction that values social, emotional, and academic diversity.

Through [a variety of] means of representation, expression, and engagement, the UDL framework demands that curriculum is accessible to all learners, including gifted students, special needs learners, language learners, and students with behavioural challenges.

The article then begins with a reference to J. Katz, *The three-block model for Universal Design for Learning*, who includes references to the works of other authors who all agree that:

The concept of Universal Design comes from the field of architecture and is driven by the goal of accessibility (Mace, Story, & Mueller, 1998). Inclusive education similarly seeks access to the social and academic life of the classroom for all learners (Katz, Porath, Bendu, & Epp, 2012, as cited in Katz, 2013 p. 157).

After an overview of where UDL began, Barteaux highlights the three core principles of UDL, which include respecting and allowing all students to explore and develop: 1) Multiple means of representation; 2) Multiple means of expression; and 3) Multiple means of engagement.

I learned that UDL is backed by nearly 40 years' worth of brain research on how a child's brain gathers information, acquires learning styles, and develops learning differences. "By providing multiple means of expression, teachers can create multiple opportunities for students to showcase their understanding" through a variety of tools, increased access to these tools, and strategies to overcome barriers to learning (Katz, 2012, cited in Barteaux, 2014, p. 51).

Personally, and professionally speaking, I would love to experience learning and teaching within this kind of framework. I would love to explore and create UDL themed activities, inquiries and potential projects and make them available to students and teachers far and wide. Katz and Barteaux note that "the pressure to instruct a wide variety of learners, while using an inflexible curriculum, and traditional teaching methods, causes a great deal of stress for teachers" (Katz, 2012 as sited in Barteaux, 2014). However, I would also add that it can be all the more stressful and frustrating for students when we continue to impose these outdated and inflexible systems upon them. We must continue to strive to explore and create UDL opportunities for all students with diverse learning needs.

This article contains numerous quotes with which I agree; however, it does not reference any specific studies that have gathered data on the immensely positive changes that UDL can

have on the affective domains of all students. I appreciated that it was written by a teacher/practitioner though, and it did serve its purpose for providing a big-picture view of UDL along with numerous great references to the supporting academic literature.

I am grateful for the opportunities that I can now pursue and develop research, tools and solutions for creating practical and pragmatic changes towards inclusive education utilizing principles of UDL within the schools and systems we serve. How do we get everyone on board with supporting these types of initiatives? It's a research topic for another time, perhaps...

References

- Barteaux, S. (2014). Universal design for learning. *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, 6(2), 50-54. ERIC Number: EJ1230738. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1230738>
- Katz, J. (2013). The Three Block Model of Universal Design for Learning (UDL): Engaging students in inclusive education. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 36(1), 153-194. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/canajeducrevucan.36.1.153>