

Creating Compassionate Classrooms Using Universal Design for Learning

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Abstract

The word *inclusion* does not refer to a child with special needs rather it embraces and celebrates differences in each child as this is what makes each one unique and like a multi flowered bouquet adds colour and variety to an otherwise drab classroom setting. One of the most interesting frameworks for teaching a diverse class has come from the Universal Design movement in architecture and product development which propagates that products and environments should be utilized by all people without the need for special designs or adaptations. This is the basic idea that is applied to learning in this framework called the *Universal Design for Learning* or UDL. It calls for the curriculum to be so designed as to accommodate all kinds of learners in the class, thus, it is not about providing special education but full education in the real sense of the term.

The UDL framework is built on three principles which emphasize

- Multiple means of representation – that is provide learners opportunities to acquire knowledge in a variety of ways.
- Multiple means of expression – that is provide learners options for expressing what they have learnt
- Multiple means of engagement – that is motivate learners constantly to raise the bar by offering appropriate challenges that increases their level of interest and participation.

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Introduction

Diversity is about all of us, and about us having to figure out how to walk through this world together. ~Jacqueline Woodson

When educators create classrooms that allow children to feel safe, respected and valued for what they have to contribute, learning happens automatically. A diverse classroom is one that embraces all the children unconditionally- their diverse personalities, backgrounds, languages, religions, family structures and learning styles to name only a few. The human mind cannot function and learn when it is overcome with fear, alienation, stress or a sense of

anxiety. Therefore, it is imperative that educators build a compassionate community and bring in compassion- that much-needed element into education. A compassionate heart irrigated by a caring teacher can go a long way in moulding students into responsible citizenry.

The word *inclusion* does not refer to a child with special needs rather it embraces and celebrates differences in each child as this is what makes each one unique and like a multi-flowered bouquet adds colour and variety to an otherwise drab classroom setting. Children need to understand from the time they step into the hallowed portals of a school that this world is made up of all kinds of people, with each one having his/her own set of beliefs, likes, dislikes, abilities, skills, interests and backgrounds. The aim of the educators should be to guide and inspire the students to celebrate and leverage this uniqueness to mutual advantage. Education is not for eking out a living, it is for life. Therefore, a shift in the paradigm is certainly called for as society now realizes that education is more than mere instruction in academic subjects.

The UDL Framework

One of the most interesting frameworks for teaching a diverse class has come from the Universal Design movement in architecture and product development which propagates that products and environments should be utilized by all people without the need for special designs or adaptations. This is the basic idea that is applied to learning in this framework called the *Universal Design for Learning* or UDL. It calls for the curriculum to be so designed as to accommodate all kinds of learners in the class, thus, it is not about providing special education but full education in the real sense of the term. UDL is based on evidence-based education practices and is hence a practical and useful design that can be used in the classes as it recognizes the fact that some children may have unusual strengths in areas that may not be emphasized in regular school curricula and that they may be made to feel like failures in a rigid school context while these very same qualities and talents may be recognized and valued in the real world. The UDL framework is built on three principles that emphasize

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UDL is aimed at removing barriers to learning and make the whole process flexible which can be adjusted according to the strengths and needs of the students. It thus provides equal opportunities for all students in the class catering to different learning styles. *Reach everyone, teach everyone* is the underlying principle of this framework. Can such a framework succeed in classrooms with a large number of students as is seen in the context of our country? The answer is a resounding yes, if educators are willing to walk that extra mile and do what is best for students in the class, then students are bound to benefit by this type of instruction than in a traditional classroom

Multimodal Instruction

Instruction and assessment are the two main areas where UDL can be used to bring about a qualitative transformation as compared to a traditional classroom. In a traditional classroom, a teacher's focus is on what to teach as she concentrates on the content and not the learner. The UDL classroom forces a teacher to shift gears as s/he focuses on how best the content can be transacted in such a manner so as to benefit all types of learners in the class. Thus it will not be a *one size fits all* type of lecturing that the teacher adopts. Instead, there can be a

short film on the concept that can serve as an attention grabber, a springboard to a healthy discussion after which the teacher can include activities veering around the concept followed by a presentation by the students. Here students learn through interaction with their peers. Students can be divided into small groups and each group is given a topic from the lesson, asked to prepare and then present. This itself serves as a kind of assessment as teachers are able to gauge how much the students have understood, where does the gap in learning lie and what else can be done to remedy the situation to enable students to gain a wholesome understanding of the topic. This kind of multimodal type of instruction caters to learners who may be auditory, visual or kinesthetic and ensures that all learners benefit in the class. An added advantage is that students enjoy and participate wholeheartedly in the learning process and no child is left behind.

Most teachers have gained a reasonable felicity in using digital aids in the post-covid times and a teacher can continue using the blended learning approach in the class and bring back the joy of learning that is woefully absent in a traditional classroom. When students take responsibility for their learning, they tend to remember what they learn and rote learning, the hallmark of the Indian education system can slowly be banished from the scene.

Flexible seating

Another important feature in a UDL classroom is that students work in groups and peer learning is leveraged to help students achieve outcomes. There is no teacher who stands and delivers a lecture to students who are all seated in fixed rows in a UDL setup. Instead, students are seated in groups and work according to their interests as the assignments are flexible and related to the students' interests. Thus if the topic is the lifecycle of a butterfly, one group can produce a cartoon strip to depict the different stages in a butterfly's life while another produces an essay while yet another group creates a powerpoint presentation. The goal is learning, the means to achieve the goal may be different.

It requires a paradigm shift in a teacher's thinking to accept and experiment with this style of learning but once teachers are open and willing to try it out in their classes, they will begin to see the results and actually enjoy teaching in such a setup.

Assessments

Assessments are abane of the present-day education system and when there is a disruption to accepted norms as we have seen during these stressful times, schools and teachers scramble to find means and methods to move students to the next grade without going through examinations and tests. In a UDL classroom, assessment is continuous and not an end but a means to an end, to reinforce the goals of learning and to reflect where there is a lacuna and how that can be plugged. This cuts out the competition and the stress is on knowledge gained and not mere performance that is measured. Assessments use multiple tools and methods and specific feedback is given to students on a regular basis. A wise teacher can provide valuable insights to students and help them improve performance and achieve success.

A young boy had lost his left arm in a devastating accident. But he was interested in learning judo and approached many masters asking them to accept him as their disciple. No one was ready except an old Grand Master who took him in as his student. The boy was an eager learner and was doing very well in his training. The only problem was that even after three months of hard training, the grand master had taught him just one move. The boy was not able to understand why.

"Sensei," he asked finally, "should I not be learning more like the other boys?"

"This is all that you need to know," the master replied kindly.

The boy believed in his teacher and kept training.

A few months later, the master took him to his first tournament. He played the first two matches The boy won against his opponent easily. The third and the bigger match was quite difficult. After a few moves, his opponent became impatient and started moving menacingly.

The spectators wondered at the uneven match between an armless young lad and an experienced powerful opponent. The match referee asked the Sensei if he wanted to call off the match. But the master smiled and asked them to continue. The opponent was overconfident. He sneered and dropped his guard. The alert boy used the only move that he had mastered to pin him down. The boy won the tournament.

"How did I win the tournament with only one move?" asked the boy in amazement. The master replied calmly. You have mastered one of the most difficult throws in judo. The only defence for that move is for your opponent to grasp your left arm."

The boy's biggest weakness had become his biggest strength. And only his teacher knew how to convert the student's weakness into his greatest strength.

Way Ahead

UDL is a great framework as it helps in creating accommodations for all kinds of learners and helps build stronger and caring classroom communities across schools. Students experience a sense of belonging in the classroom as they feel that their voices are heard and their preferences also matter in the teaching-learning process. However, teachers should be adequately trained to use the framework with confidence. The best way would be to start off in small chunks before adopting it for the entire textbook. This way there would be scope to experiment, enjoy, learn and then adapt it in their classes. For example, teachers can choose a lesson and consider ways of representing the content in multiple ways to reduce barriers thereby increasing student comprehension. Online resources are available in plenty and it requires a small effort on the part of the teacher to look out for resources to support the lesson at hand. Next teachers can choose yet another lesson and ask students to demonstrate their understanding in multiple ways.

Schools, where both teachers and students spend a large part of their waking hours, should be a place that promotes qualities like love, compassion and empathy and a classroom should be the ideal starting point for practicing these values. As the world undergoes many changes, it is not what degrees that we have acquired which matter but how we use these to build a caring society that will make this nation stand out for years to come.

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