Creating a Universal Design for Learning: Embedding IPNB, Positive Psychology, and Mindfulness

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Combining IPNB, positive psychology, and mindfulness as part of a "Universal Design for Learning" creates a positive school culture enabling amazing growth in students no matter their challenges. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is educational jargon for changing day-to-day classroom teaching to accommodate all students. It begins with acknowledging the obvious—classrooms have a wide variety of students who have some or all of the following:

- Learning disabilities such as dyslexia
- English language barriers
- Emotional challenges that lead to
- behavioral problems
- Lack of interest or engagement in school
- Sensory and physical disabilities

How can one classroom teacher be expert enough in all these areas to effectively teach accounting, for example, in a way that addresses each student's individual challenge? In the past few decades, this problem has been addressed by an approach that tests students to discover their needs, and uses the results to create an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). The IEP tells the teacher how to teach to meet each student's needs. The specificity of these needs sometimes means that specially trained teachers or separate classes or schools are necessary to meet the needs of some students. The approach has a long history of reasonable success. (The first federal special education law, PL 94-142, was signed in 1975).

In the day-to-day life of the classroom, the IEP approach has two unintended consequences. Students with IEPs go through a process of assessment and planning that makes them feel different from their classmates. For many students, "different" is a synonym for "less than" and separate. Regular classroom teachers, for their part, are responsible for a group of vastly different IEPs for approximately 15% - 20% of their students. Teachers and school psychologists, with years of experience with the IEP process, realize there are similar interventions across IEPs. "Universal Design for Learning" takes these similarities into account, and designs both a classroom and a school environment where the individual interventions are part of the whole classroom and the school. Student needs are met not by a collection of student-specific IEPs, but by ubiquitous interventions in the classroom. For the student with challenges, it normalizes day-to-day life. For the teacher, it lessens the need for managing a collection of different and sometimes conflicting plans. It also helps students who may have sub-clinical challenges that do not rise to the level of needing an IEP. It does all this by making classroom changes in three areas:

Multiple means of representation, giving all students many ways of acquiring information and knowledge, (e.g., teaching with lecture, video, reading, hands on tasks, etc.)

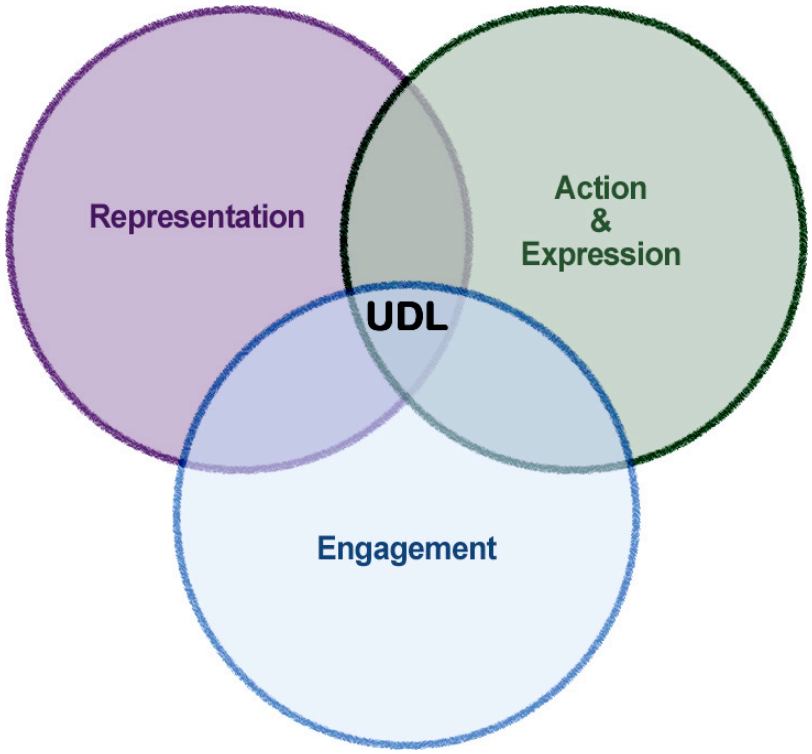
Multiple means of action and expression, providing all learners a wide variety of alternatives for demonstrating what they know, (e.g., tests, writing, presenting, dance, singing, etc.)

Multiple means of engagement, tapping into all students' intrinsic interests, offering appropriate challenges, and increasing motivation (e.g., at the school, we design time for students to pursue their interests first and develop the state required

curriculum around their interests and strengths)

Space does not allow an in depth exploration of each area, but those of us with interest and knowledge of IPNB may see that each area expands traditional linguistic left-mode teaching to include other brain areas, and, as a result, has the effect of promoting neural integration. The added benefit is that more relaxed teachers create an environment in which learning can be more easily absorbed by their diverse students. Through mirror neuron resonance, these teachers can radiate calm throughout the classroom, helping regulate the anxiety of their sometimes-stressed students—a mutually supportive and brain-integrating experience for all. Then the universal flow of the energy and information of interpersonal integration between teachers and students becomes part of the overall design as well.

Graphically, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) looks like the Ven Diagram below. Including the diagram is itself an example of UDL. To this point, you have been learning about UDL linguistically, using your left hemisphere language centers and left-mode processing. (Dan Siegel describes left-mode processing as linguistic, linear, logical and literal). As soon as you look at the diagram, you add right-mode processing (i.e., holistic, visuospacial, nonverbal). The diagram offers the holistic "big picture" of UDL in one glance, encouraging you to get the feel of the whole process. Hopefully, when you look at the diagram, the linguistic words and linear lists above will integrate with the visual in an instant, creating a mini "ah-ha" experience. The "ah-ha" feeling is integration happening across larger areas of the brain.



From: National Center for Universal Design for Learning (http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/whatisudl)

As you experience the warm afterglow of your "ah-ha," let me introduce you to 17-year-old Billy. He has high-functioning autism with its characteristic collection of symptoms, including obscure interests, overly formal language, and unusual walking gait. One of Billy's interests is an uncanny ability to speak backwards (not just the words in a sentence, but the pronunciation of each word). Billy often asks questions in class speaking backwards. He has another interesting habit—when stressed, he paces rapidly and turns abruptly. It can be disconcerting to see him walk rapidly toward a wall, then abruptly turn only a few inches from it. Maybe not surprisingly, his behavior led to ridicule and bullying in previous schools. The negative treatment led his parents to home school him for many years.

Approximately one year ago, he enrolled in the school where I consult and embed IPNB, mindfulness, and positive psychology into the UDL of the school. When a positive psychology strengths perspective is part of the universal design, talking backwards is not ridiculed. Instead, it is seen as a fascinating strength by staff and students alike. When he first arrived, Billy was often asked by students to talk backwards; then, some tried it themselves, but without much success. Several even installed an iPhone App (iReverse Speech) to practice, including this author. Everyone's acceptance and interest in his strength helped him relax and trust others—another good example of the power of interpersonal integration.

Together we began to think of speaking backwards as a language of its own. His trust led him to talk about a downside of his strength, admitting that speaking backwards could be tiring and sometimes confusing. We realized that Billy might be skilled at learning another, more practical language. He decided on Spanish. In the UDL approach, students are offered many ways to demonstrate what they have learned (i.e., action and expression in the diagram). To the surprise of this author, Billy, with years spent in the relative isolation of home schooling, choose to perform Spanish songs in front of an audience of parents, staff, and peers at a school "open mic night." His performance was a hit.

I am happy to also report that as the school year progressed, Billy's pacing diminished. His day-to-day stress seems lessened, partly because he is accepted and respected by his peers and partly because of the mindfulness practice that is part of the school's universal design. (Each school day begins with a mindfulness practice and each period of the day begins with a "mindful moment.") His parents report that he has adopted the school's mindfulness practice at home as well. The UDL atmosphere, coupled with the benefits of interpersonal integration and intrapersonal awareness created a safe haven for Billy to nurture his talents, form enduring relationships, and increase his self-awareness—no doubt getting a good start on rewiring his implicit experience of school and fostering his emerging sense of self as a valuable young person.

In closing, embedding IPNB, mindfulness, and positive psychology in the UDL of a school, while a complex process, is rewarding for students, parents, and staff alike. If you would like more information about UDL, this is a useful website: http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/whatisudl.

Kirke Olson is a New Hampshire licensed clinical and school psychologist, who sees himself as an "IPNB applicator." He applies neuroscience (IPNB) and positive psychology in his individual and family sessions with clients and in his school consultations with students, staff, parents, and administrators alike. With his wife, Sher Kamman, (also a NH licensed psychologist), he offers workshops that apply neuroscience, positive psychology, and EMDR to help people create a life they would love to live. For more information about Kirke, check out his website www.ThePositivityCompany.com or email him at kolson@wsfca.net.