

‘Universal Design’ Concept Pushed for Education

By [Christina A. Samuels](#)

The same design principles that brought Braille panels to public elevators and curb cuts to city sidewalks should be imported to the classroom and used to transform lessons and textbooks, says a coalition of education groups.

Called “universal design for learning,” the philosophy advocates creating lessons and classroom materials that are flexible enough to accommodate different learning styles.

The coalition has drafted language it wants to have included in federal education law. A requirement for states to “develop a comprehensive plan to address the implementation of universal design for learning” is in the draft bill for reauthorizing the No Child Left Behind Act released in August by the House Education and Labor Committee.

Universal design for learning, or UDL, is also supported in a reauthorization measure sponsored by Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman, I-Conn. and co-sponsored by Sens. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., and Mary L. Landrieu, D-La. Much of the Senate bill includes language taken verbatim from the coalition’s materials.

According to the tenets of UDL, lessons should be designed with accessibility in mind, instead of retrofitting existing materials in an attempt to accommodate students with learning differences. While the early days of UDL focused on helping students with disabilities, supporters say it has benefits for any student, including those who are learning English, gifted students, or students who simply learn better through methods other than a teacher’s lecture.

Sometimes, accommodating different learning styles can be achieved through the use of technology. For instance, computer devices can “read” a book aloud to a student who is blind.

Point of Agreement

However, low-tech methods can be valid applications of UDL as well. An example of a simple application is allowing a student to create a poster that visually depicts the main ideas in a classroom reading assignment, rather than asking the student to write a book report, if he or she has difficulty with written language. Developing alternate methods for students to show they’ve mastered a concept is an integral part of UDL.

Support for the concept has linked several education and disability-rights organizations, even those that have been in disagreement over other aspects of the No Child Left Behind law. Some groups call for softening or eliminating some of the sanctions imposed on schools when students in any of various subgroups, including students with disabilities, do not make adequate yearly progress under the law. Other groups fear that removing such sanctions would mean students with disabilities might not get access to rigorous instruction.

But 28 organizations have put aside those differences and come together in support of UDL, including the National Education Association, the National School Boards Association, the Council for Exceptional Children, and a host of groups that work to help children with specific disabilities.

“I don’t see how it can fail to be compelling,” said Ricki Sabia, the associate director of the national-policy center of the National Down Syndrome Society, in New York City, and one of the main drivers behind including UDL language in the reauthorized federal school law. “There’s only one thing in NCLB that we’re all in agreement on.”

The school boards’ association supports UDL because it can help all students, said Reginald M. Felton, the director of federal relations for the Alexandria, Va.-based group.

“Everyone realizes if both the special education and regular education communities can talk about the same goals, they have a lot more chance of being successful,” he said.

Teaching by Design

The “universal design for learning” educational framework relies on three principles to guide teachers as they use technology and other means to reach students with different learning styles, such as those with disabilities or learning English.

- Provide multiple, flexible methods of **presentation** that give students various ways to acquire information.
- Provide multiple, flexible methods of **expression** that offer students alternatives for demonstrating what they know.
- Provide multiple, flexible options for **engagement** to help students get interested, be challenged, and stay motivated.

SOURCE: Center for Applied Special Technology

The education groups are currently working to include more of the coalition’s UDL language in the House education committee’s draft reauthorization bill, including a precise definition of the educational philosophy.

Universal design for learning does not represent an educational package, or a simple set of techniques, according to practitioners. Rather, it is a variety of solutions to different problems, and can be compared to accessibility in the physical environment. Some sidewalk-design elements, such as curb cuts, were originally meant to accommodate people who use wheelchairs. Television closed-captioning was intended to aid people who are deaf.

Over time, those accommodations have become useful to people who do not have mobility or hearing problems, advocates point out. And both are so common now that they’re practically invisible, said David H. Rose, a co-founder of the [Center for Applied Special Technology](#), in Wakefield, Mass. Founded in 1984, CAST has spearheaded the development of classroom materials based on universal-design principles.

Removing barriers from learning materials seems just as logical when people take the time to think about the idea, Mr. Rose said. But instead, he said, people have tended to depend on the use of technology so students can access existing lessons or materials, rather than rethinking the lessons to make them more readily accessible in the first place.

CAST itself first focused solely on creating so-called assistive technology to allow student with disabilities to work with existing lesson plans. But the center’s experts learned that making classroom materials accessible doesn’t always mean students are learning the lessons teachers are trying to impart, Mr. Rose said.

“The view was more like, you fix this kid so they can fit in better,” Mr. Rose said. “The more we did it, the more we could see it wasn’t working.”

For example, highlighting key words in a text for a student isn’t helpful if those words represent the lesson students are supposed to be learning on their own. True universal design requires that educators think deeply about what each lesson is about. Those goals then guide how UDL is implemented, Mr. Rose said.

CAST’S mission still includes developing software and hardware solutions for meeting the needs of students with disabilities, Mr. Rose said. But the organization also offers classes and consulting services that teach educators how to rethink their lessons and customize them for students with different needs.

State Initiatives

Some states have already moved to implement UDL on their own. For four years, Indiana has provided grants to schools that write detailed proposals for how they would use its principles in their classrooms. School staff members also have to spend time learning about UDL, and at the end of each school’s grant, report on their achievements.

Vicki Hershman, the state project director of the program that oversees the grants, said educators at first saw UDL as a way to get technology dollars for their schools. Now, they understand that the intent is to transform the way lessons are developed and taught. She agrees with the goal of having UDL language written into the No Child Left Behind law.

“The UDL project supports all the other general education and special education initiatives we have going on,” Ms. Hershman said.

Under the grant program, one school developed a Civil War module for middle school students that included audiotapes and text-to-speech software. Another school that received a grant created a 4th grade lesson on long division that included an opportunity for students to work together in small groups to create a rap song about division, using free Web-based software.

Michigan is in the early stages of trying to start its own statewide UDL initiative, said Jeff Diedrich, who oversees the adaptive technology division for the state department of education. The state is proceeding slowly, though, Mr. Diedrich said. Proponents don’t want to present UDL as a product that can be purchased, or as a fad initiative that quickly fades.

“I’m seeing UDL get more and more attention, but it’s a danger that once something reaches the status of buzzword, it’s on the way out,” Mr. Diedrich said. “But if you can start people thinking about the curriculum as having a disability, instead of the student having a disability, it’ll be worth it.”

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