

# Designing Learning for All Learners

MARTHA L. MINOW

**H**ow can public policy help us envision and implement a new kind of curriculum—one that expands learning opportunities for everyone rather than requiring students to negotiate the constraints of traditional schooling? That is a central question posed in this collection of insightful essays, and the authors make an effective case that universal design for learning (UDL) provides a compelling answer to that question.

In fact, universal design for learning is one of the few big and truly transformative ideas to emerge in education over the past two decades. I first heard of UDL in the 1990s when I was approached by David Rose and Anne Meyer of the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) about becoming a partner in the National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum, an initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education to explore ways to improve education for students with disabilities. When David and Anne described the UDL principles and showed examples of UDL in practice, I recognized that this vision paralleled my own emerging ideas about what inclusive education should be.

In my work, I have explored ways to ensure that rights and opportunities reach those who have been marginalized by the majority or by tradition. Children who seem different from their peers—different because of race, disability, refugee or immigrant status, religion, sexual orientation,

gender, language spoken at home, economic class—have too often been denied equal opportunities to learn. Even enlightened school systems and policy makers often respond to students who differ from the real—or imagined—norm with uneasy and contradictory policies. At times, schools assert identical treatment for all as the notion of equality; at other times, schools seek to accommodate differences but do so in ways that can be stigmatizing, exclusionary, or oppressive in their low expectations of students’ potential. The very same school system may enact inclusion in the general education curriculum for individuals with disabilities alongside programs of separate instruction for students whose home language is not English. And affixing a label—such as disabled, or English language learner—may be the only way to provide individualized help in school, at the cost of stigmatizing a student and at the risk of failing to recognize how individual needs fit on a spectrum rather than falling within clear categories. The U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 declaration in *Brown v. Board of Education* that racially segregated public education is inherently unconstitutional started rather than resolved the task of ensuring equal educational opportunity for all students. A constant stumbling block has been how to recognize individual differences without producing exclusion or stigma—and how to ensure equal treatment without neglecting individual need. This dilemma of difference arises because of the constant reiteration of a norm against which individual student differences are compared; ignoring a student’s difference may extend equal treatment without accommodation, but identifying a student’s difference risks producing exclusion, stereotype, or shame.

Here is where universal design for learning is transformative. Its set of principles exposes and proposes remedies for several fundamental biases in a traditional curriculum that imagines a “normal” student and hence marginalizes anyone who does not comfortably fit that norm. Those biases proceed on the assumptions that (1) print is the best medium for acquiring information; (2) writing is the best means for expressing what one knows; (3) the ability to learn and engage in rich content depends solely on mastering these particular media; (4) “book smarts” are what matter most to learning; and (5) those who find print inaccessible or difficult deserve a less challenging, less rich, and less stimulating curriculum. Driving these assumptions is another more harmful one: that some

individuals simply will never learn as much or as well, and that is their problem, not a problem for the standard educational system.

CAST's extraordinary work with individual students has demonstrated that students who were thought to be "unteachable" because of severe disabilities can in fact learn when provided with appropriate materials and instruction in a safe environment. Not only *can* they learn, but they demonstrate hunger for knowledge, intellectual creativity, and capacity for expressing insight that lie at the core of education at its best. As David Rose and Anne Meyer have stated elsewhere, UDL was born of the realization that there is nothing "wrong" with a particular individual who has not been learning; rather, the curriculum has been inadequate to meet that individual's needs. The curriculum, not the individual, needs fixing.

This was an "aha" moment for me as well. I had long understood how a building with stairs at the entrance excludes a person who uses a wheelchair while a ramp opens access to that individual—and can ease access for a parent pushing a stroller and a person walking a bicycle as well. I had not understood, though, that for some people, a physical book is like the stairs to a building: a cause of unnecessary exclusion. I suddenly realized that securing the rights of individual students with disabilities to sit alongside other students in the general education classroom does not solve the access problem if the curriculum itself imposes barriers to learning. Universal design for learning calls for constructing the methods for communicating the curriculum with all possible students in mind in the same way that universal design in architecture directs up-front planning of the physical building for all possible uses.

Hence UDL invites creative uses of media and methods to ensure access for students with physical, attention, and cognitive differences. And we should not be surprised to find that the results hold potential benefit for students who do not have disabilities. Students who are learning English and students who are distracted by problems at home can find curricular materials engaging and accessible because of supplements like glossaries and other interactive features. UDL also focuses on the potential issues of motivation and engagement in learning and acknowledges that not every student comes or stays ready and eager to learn every day and every minute.

Here the universality of this approach becomes salient: materials designed with interactive and visual dimensions help address the undeniable generational shift in how people learn and what they want to learn. New generations of “digital natives” are born into a world of digital, portable communications devices; many use a mouse before a pen and live in a world of electronic images and sound more than print. These features of the new world dramatically change how young people acquire and use information, how they organize themselves socially, how they communicate and collaborate, and even how their brains work. Many in this generation need to touch what they are learning, to navigate through material in an order and plan of their own making, to share and collaborate, and to combine humor and irreverence with even the most serious learning. Digital natives don’t read instructional manuals first; instead they try something, and if it doesn’t work, try again, and if that doesn’t work, they keep trying. They are democratic in their approach to information; they want to explore it, share it, and assess its content even before knowing its pedigree or place in the canon. And they like multiple modes of presentation: images and sounds are as critical as words. Here UDL’s focus on engagement holds promise for educating every member of the new and successive generations; its capacity to work through multiple modes of presentation and to enable students to navigate, create, and collaborate can cultivate the passion for learning that is the most essential goal of education.

I agree with the editors of this volume that UDL deserves the attention of all who have a hand in shaping public policy (see the introduction). The law on the books calls for access to the general curriculum for students regardless of ability or disability, but realizing that vision requires more than simply telling people what the law requires. UDL offers the means to implement the vision of equal educational opportunity. The past decade has brought significant gains toward this vision. For example, the development of a National Instructional Materials Accessibility Standard (NIMAS) ensures that students with print disabilities get the classroom materials they need in appropriate formats and at the same time as their peers. The U.S. Congress in 2008 embraced UDL in the Higher Education Opportunity Act and directed postsecondary in-

stitutions and teaching education programs to follow UDL principles. These are positive steps but just a beginning.

Much more needs to be done to close the gap between the ideal of equal educational opportunity and the practice, especially in K–12 education. This book gives anyone who cares about equal educational opportunity sufficient knowledge of UDL principles and their origins to join efforts to address the most intransigent challenges facing public education today. By imagining all the different ways that people learn, those who apply universal design for learning can make a difference for all individuals.

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