Shifting Paradigms: From “Fixing” Students to Fixing Curricula

1980s - Major events contributing to educational reform and the creation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).
- The landmark report, “A Nation at Risk” decried the state of education in the United States.
- The rise in the Disability Rights Movement.
- Increase in new technologies such as personal computers advanced new ways of teaching and learning.
- Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) was founded.

1990s – Research in neuroscience and education shifted.
- Students with disabilities no longer are seen as needing help to overcome barriers in their schools.
- The curriculum is perceived as the problem, not individual students.
- Educators are able to use new technologies to change school curricula in order to meet the needs of all learners.

2000s – CAST coins the term UDL and policy makers begin to recognize the value in the new paradigm.
- The 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) is the first federal law to define and endorse UDL.
- The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) endorses UDL as a valid framework for guiding K-12 educational practice.
- Individual states take initiatives to implement UDL. For example, the NH Department of Education has partnered with CAST to develop the NH UDL Innovation Network.

Universal Design For Learning

- No “one-size-fits-all” approach to learning.
- Focus on building multiple methods and options into classroom curriculums and instructions that meet the needs of ALL learners.
- Personal computers, the Internet and digital books are tools used to create innovative ways of teaching and multiple ways of learning.

Educators

- Teachers ultimate goal is to “meet students where they are.”
- Curriculum incorporates multiple strategies and technologies for engagement, representation, and action and expression.

Students

- The “average student” is a myth.
- Learners range from those who are “gifted” to those who experience a wide range of neurodevelopmental challenges.

Technology

- Learning differences are not deficits that need to be cured or treated.
- ALL neurological functioning lies on a spectrum.

Neurodiversity

- Inclusion focuses on all learners, not just learners with disabilities.
- Inclusive schooling is about striving to make ALL students’ experiences inclusive and participatory. It is not focused on where particular students are physically “placed” such as the general ed classroom.

Inclusive Education


This conceptual model is part of a larger literature review that I am conducting to inform the evaluation team for the Teacher Residency for Rural Education (TRRE) about the UDL framework and what benefits it may offer to classrooms in rural communities. The TRRE program is based at the UNH Dept. of Education, and the TRRE evaluation team is comprised of researchers from the UNH Carsey School of Public Policy. In addition to reviewing literature on UDL, neurodiversity and inclusive education, I have watched numerous educational videos, interviewed key informants, attended a lecture on TREE and UDL and extensively reviewed the CAST website.