Enhancing instruction – for *all*

Universal Design for Learning enables delving deeper into subjects

Leslie Aden was leading her fifth grade students in a class discussion on the book *Bridge to Terabithia*.

"Who were the main characters?" she asks. Hands shoot up. Names come bellowing out. Aden jots each answer down carefully on the whiteboard.

"Let's compare them, their physical features – even their families," she continues. "Miss Bessie the cow? Will we learn much about her character? No, because she is a cow."

It's a lesson in compare and contrast. Now students must offer proof of their observations.

"What's another word for proof?" Aden asks. "That's right – evidence."

Now the students are asked to pick up graphic organizers of their choice.

"Pick out graphic organizer that works best for you," Aden says. "If you have

larger writing, you may want to use the organizer with larger boxes, they

Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

General education teacher Leslie Aden prompts Morgan Reed in a lesson on compare and contrast.

enable you to stay within the boxes. If you are a person who likes to elaborate, you may want to use the organizer with lots of boxes."

Some of the students get to work right away. Others need a bit more prompting.

"Sometimes it helps me to close my eyes and visualize," Aden said. "In your mind, you all have a vision of what each character looks like. Show me your thinking. Use your book for evidence.

"You can compare things like finances, hobbies, abilities, gender. You can compare a lot of different things."

Even the casual observer can see this general education classroom at Pocahontas Elementary School in the north central Iowa town of Pocahontas is engaged. Less obvious was Aden's tactics: Asking open-ended questions, giving students choices on characters to examine, writing words down on the whiteboard. In a nutshell: Aden was demonstrating Universal Design for Learning, known as UDL.

UDL is a framework for planning lessons that removes barriers to instruction, allowing all students to have access to learning and the curriculum. UDL gives students choices on how to express what they have learned, how they access what they need to learn, and how they are tied to their learning by choosing topics that interest them.

In her class lesson, Aden said later, enabling students to choose which character to compare and contrast – as well as choosing what to compare and contrast – is critical.

"This enabled students to learn in an

area that they may be more observant," she said.

Of course, none of that matters to fifth-grader Morgan Reed. What matters to this student on an Individualized Education Program was that she was with her peers – and learning.

Her favorite character? Leslie, hands down.

"She has a dog and I like dogs," Morgan said. "She also is kind to others."

Later in the day, Morgan sits in Peggy Fitzgerald's pull-out class for students on IEPs. Fitzgerald's lesson plan reinforces that of Aden's, a product of the two collaborating to ensure lessons are seamless from class to class.

After a refresher on looking for main ideas in stories, the students are sent to choose a book – and choosing whether to read, watch or listen, the latter two incorporating various technologies.

"Choice is huge," Fitzgerald said. "Students can choose whatever book, any theme, any type of difficulty."

The key is that students can choose books that are interesting to them. In turn, they can present the information they learned in a manner most conducive to them – whether it is writing or oral.

"What I see is that it translates into

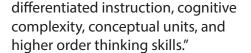*Morgan Reed is engaged in the reading of Bridge to Terabithia.*

a much deeper understanding," Fitzgerald said.

UDL, she said, isn't really a different way of teaching.

"When I started the UDL class last year, I thought to myself, 'We have been doing these things in special education all along,'" she said. "However, I have gained new ideas and available resources through UDL training. It just provides more depth to the lessons. It fits in nicely with everything else we have learned in our professional development such as

Peggy Fitzgerald's class accesses class material in different ways.

Principal Aaron Davidson

differentiated instruction, cognitive complexity, conceptual units, and higher order thinking skills."

From Fitzgerald's point of view, some of the greatest impacts on the special education students are that they are offered choices for their learning: Their learning is built upon their interests and learning styles. The students, subsequently, gain confidence.

"I utilize UDL strategies, practices, and resources every day, with every student, in every classroom setting,"

she said.

UDL wouldn't even be a conversation at Pocahontas if it were not for Principal Aaron Davidson.

"When I got the call from our Area Education Agency asking if I would be interested in having Pocahontas Elementary be a pilot school for UDL, I jumped on it due to the fact that as a district we had taken two years of professional development time to focus on learning and experimenting with Differentiated Instruction

(DI)," he said. "I looked at the UDL framework as another resource for our staff in implementing DI with fidelity."

For Davidson's team, UDL has been a game changer.

"The staff says we are not just differentiating anymore," he said. "It's changing your curriculum. That's because teachers are forced to focus on how they teach – to all kids. We delve a lot deeper into subjects. It's been fantastic."

Expert: UDL is well suited for students with disabilities

Loui Lord Nelson, a national expert on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), said UDL is not much different than aligning an Individualized Education Program to a student. But instead of focusing on an individual, UDL is for the entire classroom.

"You think of what is in an IEP, you think about extended time, perhaps preferred seating, accessibility to digital supports, the flexibility of the student to work alone with a support body," she said. "This is built in to UDL, with the intention being those students who

need those kinds of supports receive them to lower the barrier so they can access the information they need. When they have access to what they need, they can learn the lesson plan."

UDL, Nelson said, is guided by three

principles:

- Providing multiple means of representation, in which educators incorporate different ways to teach a lesson;

- Providing multiple means of action and expression, in which students are encouraged to display their learned knowledge in the ways that best suit them; and

- Providing multiple means of engagement, in which the teacher understands that effective engagement isn't a one-size-fits-all and incorporates different methods to ensure all students are engaged.

"The magic comes in for students with disabilities because they are now in an environment that includes them from the get go," Nelson said. "The options that are built into the lessons take into account many of the barriers that students with disabilities face."

Nelson cited an example of what could take place in a classroom.

"When students are asked to read a story but we are not telling them how they have to read it, some students may choose to read alone, some may gather in small groups and plug into an I-Pod, and you have another area where students are partner-reading," she said. "This is all going on in an environment where they are expected to read and comprehend. Because they have those options available, they are more likely to comprehend."

The danger with this example, Nelson conceded, is that teachers may think they will end up with a three-ring circus in their classroom.

"That's not true," she said. "You can still deliver information to your students in one way, but you have to make sure you give that information in a different way, as well. But the bottom line is that the teacher must feel comfortable with what's going on in her class."

> "The magic comes in for students with disabilities because they are now in an environment that includes them from the get go"

UDL is particularly suited for students with disabilities, she said.

"Students with disabilities have a wide variety of needs," Nelson said. "If we aren't providing them lessons and environments with a wide variety of options, those needs cannot be met. We are at a time we can access lots of information about a student's needs, but we need to use that to see what resources, tools and strategies can benefit even more students. Something as simple as underlining a word on a blackboard, it will draw some student's attention, but every student will benefit."

Most teachers are incorporating UDL to some extent already. But the key is to blend in everything, Nelson said.

"When teachers are learning about UDL, it is wonderful when they realize that so much of what they are doing is already within the framework," she said. "The next step is to encourage them to use the framework as they plan their coursework."

National expert Loui Lord Nelson says most teachers are already incorporating portions of UDL within their classrooms.

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