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**Universal Design Learning: An Exploration**

Universal Design Learning: What does it mean to effectively implement UDL? This was the question that sparked this project in the first place. I first encountered UDL during an hour-long professional development session this summer, in which my teaching intern coordinator handed us each a UDL worksheet. Without much framing or introduction, we were told to set a goal for one of our lessons, then list three means of representation, engagement, and expression for that goal. I felt, as I wrote, confused as to why we were doing this activity, and why exactly UDL was important. The exercise felt prescriptive, reductive, and as if we were cramming our lessons into a formula.

But when I encountered UDL through the lens of Jay Dolmage’s article, “Universal Design Learning: Places to Start”, I began to understand both why I felt bothered and confused by the exercise, but also why my coordinator had felt it important to discuss UDL. Universal Design Learning, which aims to embrace a wider variety of learning styles by executing more diverse classroom practices, can either feel wildly reductive or transform a classroom, depending on the way in which we talk and think about it. This web revolves around this question: how, then, can we begin to think about UDL? What are some “places to start”?

I chose to engage with this question in the form of a web because I know I won’t find a straight answer to this question. All I can and will do is begin to make meaning out of my collection of experiences and questions.

“What meaning do we make of our differences? I remember teaching a two week writing workshop with fifteen middle-school students. Some wrote stories twice the length of the page limit, others aced the haiku project, others had to work with writer’s block, and others made groundbreaking revisions to their poetry. We had the luxury of creating our own curriculum and had the ability to allow students to write in dozens of different ways, and when I consider the time I spent reading each student’s work, I realize each student’s way of thinking about the world transformed me that summer, even the students who hated writing, whom one might not consider so “smart” on the surface. This is what I reflect on when I read Simi Linton’s line that the Disability Studies field asks “What meaning do we make of our differences?” (2). This is a beautiful idea, and undoubtedly one of the reasons I want to be a teacher, but I fear the ways in which I might embrace difference in such an abstract or romanticized way that it disappears, no longer causing struggle or reckoning.

“It is a text you are invited to rewrite” (6) In Jay Dolmage’s article, “Universal Design: Places to Start”, he opens up the text for revision by both naming it as a “place to start” and also by inviting future theorists and practitioners to revise and engage with his ideas. This falls in line with the idea of UDL as being process and intention-oriented rather than goal-oriented, or a checklist. This is why I choose to frame UDL in a web form, so as to offer new connections, arrangements, and configurations of my ideas. This is an engagement I invite myself and my peers to rewrite, rearrange, and rework.

“The Default”: Jay Dolmage engages with the idea of the academic “default”, or a standard decided by a white, straight, European, upper class, able-bodied group against which students must measure themselves. The practice of Universal Design Learning can begin to dismantle the default by integrating several learning methods rather than revolving around one. The use of as not only inherent, but valuable, rather than deviant in some way.

Dolmage compares the ways in which the able-bodied and disabled identities are understood in academia in *Academic Ableism* when comparing ableism and disableism. Whereas disableism renders disability as negative, ableism “renders disability as abject, invisible, disposable, less than human, while able-bodiedness is represented as at once ideal, normal, and the mean or default” (7). Though the line seems to be thin between these two categories, Dolmage makes it clear here that ableism works by placing some bodies as the “default” or the “normal” while placing others in comparison to that mean. What would it mean, then, to acknowledge a societal default operating in the world, causing inequality while attempting to eliminate that default in the classroom?

Normality: Lennard J. Davis frames the history of disability in the United States through the development of statistics, specifically the calculation of “average” or “normal”. The idea of a bell curve, or a “normal distribution” in which the highest number of people fall into the center of two extremes problematizes, Davis argues, the identity of a disabled person who may fall outside of that normal curve. Davis writes, “When we think of bodies, in a society where the concept of the norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants. This, as we have seen, is in contrast to societies with the concept of an ideal, in which all people have a non-ideal status” (3). This historical framework acknowledges the reality of variety in humans with respect to bodies and minds, but also explains the means by which some physical variations became privileged over others. This analysis offers a way to hold space for both the diversity for which UDL asks us to account, as well as the structural inequalities that favor some learning styles over others.

Protopublic: Dolmage, in *Academic Ableism* asks us to understand the classroom as a microcosm or expression of the world around us, particularly surrounding its inequalities. Dolmage uses this framework in part to identify the stakes in integrating inclusive and equitable learning practices in the classroom and academy. Dolmage writes that “The classroom is a ‘protopublic space’. This term means that the classroom shapes larger communities. There is a tremendous potential, and tremendous responsibility, then, to examine these buildings we work in, and how they are involved in building a larger social and public space outside these walls” (8). That is, the dynamics, practices, and perhaps most importantly, affective experiences that take place in the classroom become reflected in the surrounding world.

Access Intimacy: This term comes from Mia Mingus’s blog post about the feeling when “someone else ‘gets’ your access needs. The kind of eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level” (1). I include this as a working part of my map because I believe this sense of being understood and known is one of the most important things a teacher can offer a student. I have never had the experience of being disabled in a classroom, but I have had the experience of feeling known, and feeling that my teachers just “got” what I needed. I remember my high school English teacher looking me in the eye and telling me I should really consider visiting Haverford, or telling me earnestly I could do better on a paper I churned out in one night. I don’t give these examples to reduce access intimacy to feeling known, because it clearly comes with the structural inequality of, in the outside world, being rendered as unknown or unknowable, which is something I largely do not experience. But if we can create a classroom in which each student can feel known, particularly the students who do not usually feel known in the rest of their lives due to structural inequality, we can create a protopublic in which effort is put in to “getting” what each person needs, rather than only some.

“Sometimes We Need To Get Uncomfortable”: This sentence, the title of an interview with Matthew Higgs and Lisa Sonneborn, who work with artists with disabilities, embodies for me the issue with a UDL worksheet like the one I was presented during my professional development day. I felt no sense of discomfort, never had to grapple with my identity as non-disabled, or as Eli Clare might put it, temporarily able-bodied. No meaning was made out of the differences between me and my students, and I learned nothing about my classroom that I hadn’t known before. Sonneborn says at one point in the interview, “Successfully addressing these issues depends on our willingness to let our process be complicated. As practitioners, we avoid complications ‘cause they slow things down and often feel a lot like barriers” (6). I actually felt this sense of discomfort in the most fruitful and joyful way when working with Vinetta Miller at CCW, with whom I had trouble having conversations at the beginning of the semester. Week by week, I learn more and more about her, how she speaks, and how to understand her. Creating a book together, and later creating an exhibit together will take a much longer time, but I know the process will carry meaning, hopefully for both of us.

Dismantling Topoi of Higher Ed: I have never in a deep way, as Margaret Price describes it, felt “mad at school”. I’ve felt mad on behalf of others, mad at the way it makes other people feel, but I have rarely if ever felt discounted by the topoi or values of higher education, including rationality, criticality, presence, participation, resistance, productivity, collegiality, security, coherence, truth, and independence. When I first read this article, I felt resistance to dismantling these topoi, in hindsight because I knew they benefited me. But, as Price argues, there are different types of “benefits” that may be earned when we let go of the need to be coherent, for example. Making this messy map, and processing the questions I still have around UDL, I am beginning to understand that this is not about me, but rather, I want this for *us.*

Neuroclaims: In “Universal Design: Places to Start”, Jay Dolmage critically analyzes a UDL chart which shows three parts of the brain, explaining the ways in which a teacher must engage with “recognition networks”, “strategic networks”, and “affective networks”. Dolmage illuminates the ways in which this chart reduces learners to parts of the brain. This, Dolmage writes, is an example of a “neuroclaim”, which reduces “complex concepts (often subjectivity or identity) to measurable entities in the brain through reduction” (5). That is, a neuroclaim takes a holistic, lived experience, and reduces it to a biological concept, such as a part of the brain. Avoiding neuroclaims, thus, means acknowledging experience as complex and embodied rather than calculable, which, as Sonneborn and Higgins remind us, is complicated. It is easier to think of our students as a collection of brains, but this understanding really misses the point.

Neurodiversity: Nick Walker makes a point to name neurodiversity as a fact rather than a perspective one takes. Variation, Walker points out, is just an inherent part of life, but as Linton also points out, we can make different meaning out of that variation (4). Walker defines neurodiversity as “the diversity of human brains and minds—the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species” (1). This notion of infinite variation further demonstrates the damage in neuroclaims, which essentialize and reduce experience to one’s biology, when in fact experience is boundless.

I remember the way this struck me when I graded papers for the first time. I watched my parents grade papers with dread, as they spent long hours at the dinner table jotting down notes on essays. But in this moment, in which I received fifteen wildly different stories, true and untrue, set all over the world, with varied levels of clarity, linearity, and cohesion, I understood the depth of experience and the richness of difference that sat before me. Outside of the short time we spent together, our lives were infinitely different, and to me that was incredible.

Universal Design Learning: What does it mean to effectively implement UDL? I revisit this question having collected the quotes, moments, terms, and experiences which in I felt I could begin to find some meaning. I embarked on this project partially out of curiosity and partially out of fear. The vastness of difference I will begin to encounter next year as a teacher scares me, and finding a tool through which I could actually begin to understand and make meaning of these difference perhaps scared me even more. I’ve come out, having arranged and contextualized these ideas, with a few takeaways. As Dolmage frames his piece, “Universal Design: Places to Start”, I also see this web and these aspects of my key as up for expansion and revision. I don’t think I’ll fully know what this process will physically, concretely look like until I meet my students and begin to actually learn about their needs, but I have some intentions I’d like to carry with me into the year, and “live into”.

To me next year, effectively implementing UDL will mean welcoming complexity, messiness, and the unknown. It will mean building genuine relationships, and connecting with others beyond the surface. It will mean working to understand and dismantle structural inequality around disability, and other intersecting aspects of identity. It will mean complicating, even trying to eliminate the understanding I carry with me of what is “normal” or the “default”. And it will also mean understanding that my well-being as a non-disabled person is interconnected with with the well-being of the disabled community, and working to dismantle these systems for *us*.

To hold myself accountable for these goals and intentions, I will open them up to my peers, as well as other teachers I trust, and revisit them as I enter next year and throughout my teaching experience. I am ready to continue unlearning ideas about disability that will cause harm to my future students, and hold these intentions embedded in Universal Design for Learning with me as I teach.

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