

# Connecting Universal Design for Learning With Culturally Responsive Teaching

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## Abstract

Urban students are increasingly diverse in race, culture, language, and background knowledge. Educators must consider how students' differences affect learning and align pedagogies that address this diversity. Universal design for learning (UDL) has provided educators with a framework for differentiation to address learner differences. Using UDL principles without explicitly considering how cultural differences and perspectives affect learning may increase the disparity in student achievement for students of color. Likewise, the same applies to the effect of socioeconomic status or language development on students' preparation for learning in a "typical" school environment. Culturally responsive pedagogies prompt educators to design instruction from the perspective of students' diversity as strengths rather than deficits. Frequently overlooked aspects of culturally responsive pedagogy are compared with the facets of the UDL framework to provide teachers with additional considerations when planning for effective instruction.

## Keywords

culturally responsive teaching, differentiated instruction, diverse learners, opportunity gap, universal design for learning, urban education

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Increasingly in urban environments educators teach students who are diverse in culture, language, socioeconomic status, and ability. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2016) from 2003 to 2013 enrollment in U. S. public schools shifted from 59% students who identified as White to 50%; the number of Hispanic or Latino students increased from 19% to 25% in the same period. The remaining 25% of students are African American, Native American, and Asian or Pacific Islander. In addition, the NCES (2016) reported a national increase in the number of children below 18 years living in poverty, from 15% in the year 2000 to 20% in 2014. Historically learners who are diverse in language, race, or culture, or ability, and students who are growing up in poverty represent the groups of students at-risk of underperforming compared with their peers (Edyburn, 2010). Furthermore, factors such as race, social class, and language deeply influence students' thinking, values, beliefs, and behaviors (Banks, 1996).

Teaching diverse learners is a complex task with high demands for students' proficiency (Ladson-Billings, 2011). Tomlinson (2001) indicated that teachers must differentiate instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners. When planning for instruction, educators must be aware of their students' readiness to learn, their interests, and their learning profile, which includes learner preferences, strengths, and challenges. Every individual's background and experiences (in and out of the classroom) shape the learner. Educators even need to be aware of the extent that previous learning experiences have been meaningful and connected to their lives. This knowledge becomes especially important for students who have been historically oppressed and marginalized. Villegas and Lucas (2002) found when school experience emphasized rote memorization and teacher-centered learning, then students' belief in education's potential value was limited, which further reduced motivation to learn.

For instructional planning to truly make a difference for all learners, educators must consider how students' differences affect learning, and align pedagogies that effectively address those differences. Without an awareness of how experience and culture can affect learning, there is a danger of disproportionate representation in special education, and the possibility of "confusing disability with diversity" (Gay, 2002, p. 614). The same is true for the affect of socioeconomic status or language development on students' readiness for learning in a "typical" school environment. Because teachers' attitudes toward, actions with, and expectations of diverse learners in no small way determine the outcomes for students, educators must be aware of their biases and how such stereotypes can be a threat to students' learning (DeCuir-Gunby, DeVance, Taliaferro, & Greenfield, 2010). Educators should select pedagogies meant to differentiate, provide varied levels of challenge, and give students opportunities for self-determination in the classroom.

Dosch and Zidon (2014) described the practice of differentiation as an ongoing cycle of teaching and assessment in which assessment informs the next steps of instruction. Through an analysis of the literature their study noted that students across all racial groups, socioeconomic status, and levels of English language acquisition benefited from intentionally designed differentiated instruction. In reviewing the research on neuroscience, Margolis, Meese, and Doring (2016) examined the role of flexible, differentiated instruction as a means to develop inquiry and problem-solving skills with diverse, urban learners. Margolis, et al. indicated that it was imperative that an instructional shift occurred in urban settings where traditionally teachers have provided an excessive amount of structure to drill lower level thinking skills.

## Frameworks to Support Diverse Learners

Two pedagogical frameworks designed to address student differences are universal design for learning (UDL) and culturally responsive teaching (CRT). Both UDL and CRT consider ways in which traditional instructional approaches result in barriers to learning for “non-traditional” students. These obstacles are embedded within the class climate, the modes of instruction and assessment; instructional materials, or the types of learning tasks and expected outcomes for the learners. For example, when teachers have lower expectations for students, the instructional emphasis may be teacher-centered and teacher-directed with few requirements for students to engage in higher level thinking or problem solving. Results of lower expectations of students included disengaged students, poor school performance, and increased drop-out rates (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2010; Steele, 2010). Doran (2015) found UDL-reinforced students who were developing language skills through providing balanced levels of support and challenge as well as promoting high expectations.

Both UDL and CRT encourage teachers to proactively consider educational approaches that *should* result in increased student engagement and learning. In both models, teachers view students’ differences as strengths rather than shortcomings (Edyburn, 2010; Moore & Neal, 2007). The authors will discuss UDL and CRT and strategies for combining these frameworks to further guide educators in making decisions based on the specific attributes of diverse learners in their classrooms.

### UDL

UDL embodies a flexible, research-based planning framework that guides teachers’ instructional decision making. The National Center on UDL (2013)

described UDL as “a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone—not a single, one-size-fits-all solution but rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs” (para. 1).

UDL has three principles that guide teachers’ implementation (Rose & Meyer, 2002):

1. Provide multiple means of representation
2. Provide multiple means of action and expression
3. Provide multiple means of engagement

Barriers to learning should be viewed from within the curriculum, instruction, and assessment methods rather than as deficits within the students. As teachers plan, they need to be aware of their students’ present levels in comparison with the lesson outcomes, skills, and standards. Instruction, materials, and assessments should be designed to increase students’ proficiency on the standards and related learning goals. “In the process of identifying clear goals, teachers can consider potential barriers students may have when reaching the goal” (Rao & Meo, 2016, p. 5). To clearly identify barriers and obstacles to students’ learning, educators must be aware of students’ skills and background knowledge as related to the standards.

The very structure of the UDL blueprint encourages teachers to think flexibly about the learner characteristics and the barriers students may have in accessing the instruction and materials; assessment, and engagement. Each of the facets of UDL is further broken down into guidelines with multiple checkpoints to direct teachers’ considerations for implementation (National Center on UDL, 2013). Within each of these areas, teachers develop an awareness of potential barriers to their class content and the learning environment to thoughtfully integrate UDL principles (National Center on UDL, 2013; Rose & Meyer, 2002).

*Multiple means of representation.* Multiple means of representation includes the variety of ways that teachers present information to students. Guidelines within this facet of UDL include differentiating ways in which students can perceive information, providing options for written and spoken language, including mathematical symbols/notations; and options for comprehension. Within multiple means of representation, teachers will need to consider how students best perceive information, how to present information in multiple ways, and if multimedia could make abstract concepts more concrete. Vocabulary, critical features, and big ideas should be emphasized or highlighted for students, with clear connections made to students’ background knowledge and perspectives.

*Multiple means of action and expression.* Multiple means of action and expression includes the multiple ways that teachers can formatively or summatively evaluate students, as well as engage students in self-evaluation. The guidelines that further delineate the area of action and expression include providing options for physical action, expression, and communication; and executive functions. Within this UDL area, there are many considerations for students' use of technology, assistive technology, and communication devices on classroom tasks. In addition to students' technology use, however, teachers also need to consider multiple ways to assess students, beyond paper and pencil tasks. Teachers must also provide students with opportunities to build fluency with new skills. Within this, students will be most successful if assessment *for* learning occurs; when students receive frequent, specific, corrective feedback as they learn, and have opportunities to self-evaluate their learning then learning increases (Hall, Vue, Strangman, & Meyer, 2004; Stiggins, 2004). With the emphasis on building executive functioning skills, teachers must develop a student-centered learning environment; learning activities should be designed to increase students' engagement with and self-management of the learning processes (National Center on UDL, 2013; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). When implemented well, students are actively involved in making meaning of new information, using learning strategies, evaluating their understanding of class content; and monitoring their progress.

*Multiple means of engagement.* Multiple means of engagement encourages educators to consider ways to increase students' interest, motivation, and perseverance with learning as well as promote high expectations for every learner. Reasons for students' disengagement from and dropping out of school are related to a lack of academic success. Achievement gaps lead to students' dissonance and discouragement with school. Without appropriate levels of challenge and support, the achievement gap widens through elementary and middle school; behavioral issues that stem from school frustration will perpetuate the problem of school as a negative space and experience (Gooden, 2013). The guidelines for multiple means of engagement prompt teachers to consider ways to create student-centered learning, including the use of student choice on authentic and relevant learning tasks (Rao & Meo, 2016). Persistence is developed through goal-setting, varied levels of demand, collaboration with peers, and the development of coping skills/strategies. By varying instructional groupings and encouraging students to engage in oral discourse with their peers, students increased engagement, new language, vocabulary, and the zone of proximal development (Doran, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). A safe space with limited threats and distractions maximized peer-to-peer learning (National Center on UDL, 2013). To support students with

self-management and self-regulation, teachers should provide feedback to students in a manner that encourages mastery, so that learning is ongoing.

### *Teaching Every Learner*

Flexible instructional materials, delivery, and assessment were beneficial in classrooms with academically diverse learners (Browder, Mims, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, & Lee, 2009; Dymond et al., 2006; Lieber, Horn, Palmer, & Fleming, 2008; Marino, 2009; Pearson, 2015). UDL as a framework to increase students' engagement and learning outcomes has focused on students with special education needs, but UDL was designed as a means to facilitate instruction for *every* learner. Rao and Meo (2016) noted that UDL's flexibility allowed educators to select elements of UDL to meet students' needs within their content and context for learning. Edyburn (2010) cautioned that educators must be knowledgeable in the varied ways that their students are diverse to design and plan instruction that truly addresses the requirements of every learner. Steele (2010) further warned that even with differentiation, a mismatch between instruction, materials, and assessment could occur when teachers were aware of how linguistic and/or cultural diversity affected students in the classroom.

### *CRT*

There are varied definitions of CRT practices. Aronson (2016) noted that culturally relevant education included high expectations for every learner, cultural competence, sociopolitical awareness, and the classroom as a community. Piazza, Rao, and Protacio (2015) found that dialogue and opportunities for collaboration between learners, visual representations, and inquiry-based learning provided the foundation for culturally responsive literacy practices. Villegas and Lucas (2002) indicated that multiple levels of awareness were necessary for teachers to be culturally responsive. This includes knowledge of personal biases, students' backgrounds/strengths, how the learning environment should build from students' strengths; and how to bring about change in school systems. Hammond (2015) developed a view of culturally relevant education that synthesized all of these concepts with themes from brain-based research in learning. According to Hammond, CRT) has four overarching themes that guide teachers to take a strength-based approach to diversity in the classroom. Each of these topics is comprised of multiple facets for teachers' consideration when planning to teach diverse learners:

1. Awareness
2. Learning partnerships
3. Information processing
4. Community of learners and learning environment

*Awareness.* Hammond (2015) indicated awareness includes an understanding of culture in society including the levels of culture, cultural archetypes, and the sociopolitical contexts of race and culture. Educators must be aware of principles in developmental milestones in learning. Awareness also includes the teacher's knowledge of their personal cultural experiences, perspectives, and biases (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Ladson-Billings (1995) described these components of awareness as cultural competence and critical consciousness. The goal of this awareness is to recognize systemic oppression and understand one's role in changing these patterns to promote social justice and systems change. If teachers do not possess this level of mindfulness, it would be difficult to facilitate the development of students' critical literacy skills (Freire, 2000). Mindfulness, therefore, also refers to developing students' awareness of systemic bias, and how to move away from the status quo.

When institutions at any level become disengaged from the populations they serve, the possibility increases to become self-serving. Educators should be involved in their students' communities to achieve awareness of their students' realities and better understand how the school's structures, policies, and practices will positively or negatively affect their students and the community (Ginsberg, 2005; Yosso, 2005).

*Learning partnerships.* Learning partnerships in culturally relevant education reshape teacher and student relationships; changes in this dynamic are designed to increase students' ownership of learning and sense of efficacy in the learning process. In establishing a culturally responsive learning environment, teachers reduce the threats related to cultural stereotypes and lower expectations of diverse learners (Gay, 2002; Steele, 2010). A balance exists between students' responsibility for learning and the levels of teacher's support and challenge in the classroom. Thus, learning environments become student-centered; teachers provide feedback to students that encourage growth and mastery of new skills (Hammond, 2015). Learning partnerships should be multifaceted to include other students, parents, and the community to increase ownership of success in and out of school.

*Community of learners and the class environment.* Building from the learning partnerships facet is the fourth area of culturally relevant education: building

a community of learners. This area connects to the safety of the classroom environment, and the procedures that manage and restore justice when conflicts occur. The classroom should be a safe space for learning, respectful collaboration, questions, mistakes, and conflicts (Ginsberg, 2005). Steele (2010) described the phenomenon and impacts of stereotype threat in *Whistling Vivaldi*, which outlined the results of a series of studies on groups of students who have traditionally been marginalized and stereotyped based on one or more of their identities. Participants included women in math, African Americans or Latinos in K12 and higher education settings, and even White men in sports typically dominated by African Americans. Typically high-achieving and motivated test subjects were used to explore the impact of the pressure to perform for these groups with and without stereotyping or identity threats “looming” in the background. Steele (2010) found when a threat of a biased activity or evaluation was present the results of the assessment were universal: The group receiving the stereotype threat underperformed and consistently an achievement gap was present.

*Information processing.* The area of information processing strongly correlates to UDL principles; teachers are prompted to select materials and modes of instruction that are accessible to their audience. This includes considerations related to the material’s level of challenge, and cultural relevance; modes of instruction, student engagement, authentic connections between school and community environments; and mastery-oriented feedback. Teachers should also provide students with direct instruction in cognitive strategies so that they can self-monitor their progress and understanding. In addition, self-monitoring links to learning partnerships through adding another layer of student responsibility and competence in learning. Ginsberg (2005) noted that when learning was relevant to students’ lives and perspectives and provided for challenging applications of learning, students were more likely to be motivated and engaged in learning.

Furthermore, how students process information relates to how they learn from and manage mistakes. Hammond (2015) emphasized mistakes as opportunities for the greatest amount of learning. Once a student has developed a negative self-image as a learner, a replacement narrative must be taught to disrupt the negative self-talk. Rather than viewing a failure as a result of race or culture, instead develop the understanding that new concepts and skills often require multiple and varied opportunities for practice. When teachers value the process of learning and not just final grades, students’ motivation for learning and risk-taking in learning increased (Hammond, 2015; Ricci, 2013). Teachers who praise effort, metacognition, task completion, and students’ questions will deepen students’ learning and foster the belief in the brain’s plasticity.

Van Garderen and Whittaker (2006) also reviewed the use of UDL principles in combination with equity pedagogy when planning for their culturally and linguistically diverse high school social studies class. Multicultural instruction was found to reduce the achievement gap. Van Garderen and Whittaker emphasized the importance of knowledge construction, methods used to reduce prejudices, and the systemic practices that perpetuate inequality. Although Margolis et al. (2016) stated found that students' cultures and experiences needed to occur in all aspects of the school environment, the emphasis of this article is on UDL and CRT practices in the classroom. "Optimal motivation in the brain occurs under appropriate levels of stress, where the learner experiences 'anticipation,' but avoids dis-stress (too much anxiety)" (Margolis et al., 2016). When teachers consider their students' cultures and contexts, they can implement appropriate levels of challenge and support.

## Overlap Between UDL and CRT

UDL and CRT overlap in many key areas. For example, following guidelines in the multiple means of engagement, teachers reduce threats and distractions from the learning environment. Regardless of race, culture, or language, individuals' brains are "hardwired" to "avoid threats to safety at all costs" (Hammond, 2015, p. 37). Hammond noted that this was important because the limbic region of the brain houses both the amygdala and the hippocampus. The amygdala is responsible for the flight, fight, or freeze response to threats and *perceived* threats. When the amygdala is activated, it expands, providing less room in the brain for the hippocampus, which results in diminished space for working memory (Hammond, 2015).

Threats and stressors in the classroom can include lower expectations by the teacher, devaluing of cultural capital for groups outside the dominant culture and systemic inequality (Parsons, 2005). Students of color often do not consider schools safe places; 82% of teachers are White, only 2% of teachers are African American males (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2010) stated, "Developing this sense of belonging becomes difficult for African Americans since the school context has a history of racial discrimination that has contributed to the achievement gap" (p. 184). However, when schools and teachers foster an environment in which students feel safe, valued, and celebrated are more likely to be successful (Fiedler et al., 2008; Gay, 2002; Hammond, 2015; Steele, 2010). Table 1 highlights research-based instruction grounded in culturally responsive pedagogies and explicitly connects these supports to the UDL framework. These guiding principles focus teachers on potential barriers within instruction, assessment, and materials rather than the view of student-centered deficits.

**Table 1.** Connecting UDL and CRT.

UDL principles	Explicit connections to CRT
<p>Multiple means of representation provide options for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perception</li> <li>• Language and symbols</li> <li>• Comprehension</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visual, auditory, and multimedia representations to reduce barriers to print</li> <li>• Collective and collaborative learning to discuss new content, opportunities to hear and use vocabulary, learn from peers</li> <li>• Explicit instruction and concrete/visual representations of new vocabulary (Doran, 2015; Piazza, Rao, &amp; Protacio, 2015)</li> <li>• Supporting digital and visual literacies as foundational to students' learning and motivation to learn (Richardson, Morgan, &amp; Fleener, 2012)</li> <li>• Reshaping the curriculum to include resources with multiple perspectives throughout the year (not during a special week or month), including race/race history as part of the curriculum (Fiedler et al., 2008; Howard &amp; Navarro, 2016)</li> <li>• Draw on primary resources from multiple perspectives</li> <li>• Cross-cultural conversations that challenge the dominant perspective (Howard &amp; Navarro, 2016)</li> <li>• Diversity (in the classroom and the community) is viewed as a strength, a resource to extend understandings of historical and social perspectives</li> <li>• Teachers' attitudes and instructional approaches demonstrate that intelligence is expandable, rather than set (Hammond, 2015; Ricci, 2013)</li> </ul>
<p>Multiple means of action and expression provide options for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical action</li> <li>• Expressive skills and fluency</li> <li>• Executive functions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Honoring different methods of students' sharing knowledge, such as storytelling, family histories and biographies, chronicles, and other narratives; valuing experiential knowledge and traditions (Howard &amp; Navarro, 2016; Yosso, 2005)</li> <li>• Acknowledging both standard English and local discourse styles, supporting students with code switching for different kinds of communication demands. Selecting the language for the task is like selecting an outfit for an event based on the event's formality (Crystal, 2004).</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for collaboration and reciprocal teaching, to increase students' oral language usage, fluency, and comprehension (Doran, 2015; Piazza et al., 2015)</li> <li>• A community of learners (especially for students to build their narrative)</li> <li>• Corrective feedback from the teacher is clearly and explicitly framed by and connected to high standards (Hammond, 2015)</li> <li>• Use metacognitive strategies to change students' negative thought processes when they encounter learning challenges</li> <li>• Students use metacognitive strategies to monitor and increase their understandings</li> </ul>

(continued)

**Table 1. (continued)**

UDL principles	Explicit connections to CRT
Multiple means of engagement provide options for	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designs assignments that allow students to construct knowledge and make meaning of their world</li> <li>• Use examples and analogies from students' lives (Villegas &amp; Lucas, 2002)</li> </ul>
• Recruiting interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow for student choice on assignments/topics to increase personal relevance (Ginsberg, 2005)</li> </ul>
• Sustaining effort and persistence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote the use of cultural capital from within the community for mentoring and learning (Yosso, 2005)</li> </ul>
• Self-regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote active citizenship (locally and/or globally) for authentic problem-solving and promote social justice (DeCuir-Gunby, DeVance, Taliaferro, &amp; Greenfield, 2010)</li> <li>• Engaged in sustained thought with critical material</li> <li>• Students create affirmations/express their values associated with learning to reduce the self-image threat (Steele, 2010)</li> <li>• Reducing threats and distractions: supportive relationships, communicate high expectations in the students' ability in connection to high/rigorous standards (Steele, 2010; Tatum, 1997)</li> <li>• Promote an environment of mutual respect (among students and between students and teachers; Ginsberg, 2005; Richards, Brown, &amp; Forde, 2004)</li> <li>• Promote growth mind-set with students: change negative self-talk regarding "mistakes" as opportunities for and a part of learning, place an emphasis on effort (not ability), and the malleability of intelligence (Tatum, 1997)</li> <li>• Positive and proactive behavior supports are in place, behavioral expectations are clear (Fiedler et al., 2008)</li> </ul>

Note. UDL = universal design for learning; CRT = culturally responsive teaching.

## Expanding the UDL Framework to Specifically Consider Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

The suggested culturally responsive elements demonstrate how instructional planning is further enhanced when acknowledging how race, cultural, and linguistic differences that could affect students' learning. This understanding is an essential prerequisite for teachers in urban settings. Table 1 does not contain an exhaustive list of culturally responsive considerations, but connects the features of CRT that might be overlooked when planning.

Educators have erroneously described both UDL and CRT as simply good teaching (Edyburn, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, both UDL and CRT require teachers to be aware of their students as individuals and plan

supports that address their learners' unique learning needs. This mindfulness includes the knowledge of students' strengths and abilities; backgrounds, skills, cultures, and preferences. Both frameworks guide teachers to look at the benefits of their students' diversity, rather than viewing students through a deficit lens (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Yosso, 2005).

In addition, teachers must be aware of their personal biases to ensure high expectations of every learner and encourage their diverse students' cultural capital from a strength-based perspective. Without the knowledge of how their experiences and culture affect their views and attitudes, teachers may try to be "colorblind" in the classroom, or even think that cultural responsiveness is merely an additional or unnecessary demand placed on educators (Gay, 2002; Pollock, Bocala, Deckman, & Dickstein-Staub, 2016). Pollock et al. (2016) noted that preservice teachers who felt most overwhelmed with CRT viewed the principles as something extra they needed to remember to do in addition to everything else they were supposed to teach, rather than seamlessly integrating CRT into the lessons for successful teaching. When planned proactively, UDL with CRT, combine as part of the blueprint for increasing students' success in meeting teachers' high expectations for the intended learning outcomes. Such enhancements to the traditional UDL framework assist teachers in the urban settings with more explicit proactive planning for every student.

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