

Universal Design

An educational blueprint for today's diverse classrooms



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THE WORLD IS already a much smaller place and our classrooms are increasingly diverse. Schools are charged with educating students who speak various languages and who have a wide range of pre-existing knowledge from vastly different cultural contexts. This lends itself to a myriad of benefits for students: spontaneous cultural exchange, increased global awareness and unique learning communities are just a few. These invaluable elements of an international classroom cannot be manufactured, not even with the most diligent planning by a careful teacher.

However, to an educator, they also mean that there are just as many unique learning needs in that same classroom. The questions that then arise for these teachers are: How can I ensure my teaching matches every student's needs? What does a globally-conscious lesson plan really consist of? The truth is, there is no "one size fits all" answer, but there are strategies that can be put in place.

"Universal Design," a term originally used in the field of architecture, has since been adopted by the education sector. Originally penned by English architect Selwyn Goldsmith in 1963, the principle states that architectural design must consider all manner of people that may access the given structure. While some people might use the stairs, others may enter using a ramp and so forth. However, the people using these avenues aren't always the usual suspects you would assume them to be. Stairs are not

just for those who walk well, nor are ramps simply for those in wheelchairs. Stairs are the most straightforward path yes, but they may also benefit people who are in physical therapy after a hip surgery in need of the challenge, toddlers mastering the skill of the step, or someone looking to burn a few extra calories whenever they have the chance.

Inversely, while it's true ramps can be used by individuals in wheelchairs, they can also be used by someone wearing rollerblades, one who has a heavy suitcase in tow, or perhaps one with a temporary sprain of the ankle, trying to maneuver their recently-acquired crutches.

Architects realized they could not foresee who would use their buildings and who would not, so they came up with the ultimate "just in case." The idea behind Universal Design is to construct a building that can be accessed multiple ways, by multiple people, for multiple reasons. The design behind a lesson in a global classroom mirrors this same ethos.

As teachers charged with diverse classrooms, our learners each have a unique blend of strengths, needs and interests. As a result, we need to ensure there are multiple ways for our students to access the curriculum in a meaningful way. It sounds easy, right?

An architect will design several buildings, perhaps different types of structures with different functions in his or her lifetime; an impressive feat. However, consider now that teachers

must design several lessons, across multiple subjects, sometimes across multiple student populations *every single day*. It does not sound all that difficult at first, but when you really consider what quality teaching and lesson planning consists of, you realize that teachers really do make up all those summer hours through planning and preparation during the academic year.

Like the architect using data to demonstrate the needs of the population that the building will serve, I use assessment to identify an individual's learning needs, learning styles, and social/emotional needs to carefully plan support, whether it be customized goals, assessment procedures, teaching methods or resources.

That does not mean, however, that a student who is reading at their expected level will not benefit from the visual supports I have designed for a student with autism in my class. Perhaps the student performing at grade level used the picture support to help them derive the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Perhaps they attempted to read for context and still found themselves at a loss, but with incidental access to picture support, they were able to move forward with the momentum of the lesson as opposed to getting stuck on this one word they simply could not figure out, causing them to disconnect with the lesson objective. Perhaps that one word was crucial to comprehension. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.

No matter how much I use assessment, I still cannot always predict what learning support may or may not benefit a pupil in my class; therefore, it makes sense to build as many learning supports into my lessons "just in case" it may reach a child when I least expect it. One word in one lesson may not seem like a lot, but it may allow learning to take place that may not otherwise happen.

While it may sound like a lot of extra work for not a huge amount of difference, teachers are dedicated professionals. It would be easier, yes, not to go the extra mile — but teachers want their students to flourish. Teachers are architects, the lesson plans the blueprints, and every child a growing structure. ■

