

Book Review

A Systems-Wide Approach to Universal Design for Learning Implementation

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Universally Designed Leadership: Applying UDL to Systems and Schools
by Katie Novak and Kristan Rodriguez

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Universal Design for Learning (UDL), an instructional framework based in neuroscience, optimizes teaching and learning by supporting learners through three overarching principles: Multiple Means of Engagement, Multiple Means Representation, and Multiple Means of Action and Expression (“About universal”). These principles and the subsequent framework that grew out of the work of CAST co-founders and framework co-creators Dr. David Rose and Anne Meyers has become greater than the sum of its parts. Practitioners who have even dabbled in Universal Design for Learning have likely come to the understanding that UDL is a student-centered value system of flexibility, accessibility, and high standards for all students; indeed, the goal of Universal Design for Learning is to create learning environments where students grow to be experts in their own learning. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) defines and endorses Universal Design for Learning as the framework for designing learning experiences that support the success of all learners.

In the book *Universally Designed Leadership: Applying UDL to Systems and Schools* authors Katie Novak and Kristan Rodriguez apply a Universal Design for Learning framework to Educational Leadership. Novak and Rodriguez begin by reminding readers of CAST’s suggested model of UDL implementation which includes five phases: Explore, Prepare, Integrate, Scale, and Optimize. *Universally Designed Leadership* is intended to support schools and districts in the first three phases (Explore, Prepare, and Integrate) with a promised forthcoming second volume to support the final phases (Scale and Optimize). In true UDL fashion, Novak and Rodriguez explicitly state the

goal of their work: “Our goal is to help education leaders learn why UDL is important, what groundwork needs to be laid to implement UDL, and how to start to build the system” (Novak & Rodriguez, 2016, p. x). “Chapter 1: Building Your Understanding” begins by activating or supplying UDL background knowledge for readers and helping leadership understand the necessity of “minimizing the threat of adopting ‘another’ initiative” (Novak & Rodriguez, 2016, p.1). In this chapter, Novak and Rodriguez masterfully apply the metaphor of gravity to leadership: “Like gravity, great leaders are a force that can pull together their colleagues to create a highly

functional system” (Novak & Rodriguez, 2016, p. 2). No time is wasted in articulating that leaders themselves must be expert learners as they navigate the phases of UDL implementation.

Universally Designed Leadership provides a look into one district’s thinking, engagement of stakeholders, and self-reflective practices that led them to the phases of UDL implementation. Armed with their own mission and the endorsement of UDL in ESSA, they set forth in creating a shared vision for the district, resolving to do the following: “design an inclusive plan, implement the plan, monitor progress, and refine the strategy” (Novak & Rodriguez, 2016, p. 7). One of the highlights of *Universally Designed Leadership* is that it features many tools, graphics and tables (multiple means of representation) that help readers understand how these critical components of district or school-wide UDL implementation align to the UDL framework. For instance, on the table that aligns the steps of creating a shared vision to the UDL framework, the step Design a Plan for Shared Vision aligns to these UDL components

- Provide multiple means of engagement by optimizing relevance, value, and authenticity as you consider all stakeholders and their involvement.
- Provide multiple means of action and expression by guiding appropriate goal-setting and planning for strategy development.

The table aligns each part of the shared vision to actionable UDL steps, and it is just one of several alignment tools to guide leadership in their

thinking, reflecting, and strategizing through the Explore and Prepare phases of implementation. Perhaps one of the most helpful alignment tools in *Universally Designed Leadership* is the one that shows the crosswalk between UDL and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), New Curriculum Standards, and Educator Evaluation. This alignment tool will be pivotal for schools and districts who are seeking to eliminate random acts of school improvement, improve student outcomes, and organize the meaningful work they are already doing.

For readers who are fans of Novak’s *UDL Now*, they probably loved her teacher translation of the guidelines. In *Universally Designed Leadership*, Novak and Rodriguez bring that same clarity and functionality to administrators in a version that articulates the “big ideas of each guideline and its implications for administrators” (Novak & Rodriguez, 2016, p. 8). Great UDL leaders will be dog-earring, highlighting, and referring to these pages of *Universally Designed Leadership*. This understanding of the guidelines as they apply to administrators will move them through the critical conversations about data, data-collecting, and data-based decision-making, all detailed, aligned, and supported in the Explore phase of *Universally Designed Leadership*, a phase the authors liken to readying the site upon which to pour a foundation for a home.

Novak is a master of UDL analogy, and there’s no shortage of that in this book. Novak and Rodriguez skillfully thread the analogy of building a house throughout the pages of *Universally Designed*

This movement toward UDL has brought forth inspiring leaders and advocates like Katie Novak. Novak’s work in UDL as a veteran teacher and now administrator in Massachusetts, and her passion for bringing UDL to the masses is evident in her first titles *UDL Now: A Teacher’s Guide for Applying UDL in Today’s Classroom* and *UDL in the Cloud*. In one of her latest books, Katie Novak teams up with seasoned administrator Kristan Rodriguez to bring us *Universally Designed Leadership: Applying UDL to Systems and Schools* (from CAST Professional Publishing), a book that leverages their collective expertise in a system-wide approach to UDL implementation. *Universally Designed Leadership* bears the appealing and even endearing hallmarks of much of Novak’s work: practical and functional knowledge, masterful analogy, and a trusted, authentic teacher voice.

Leadership which provides the reader with a cohesive vision to the work of UDL implementation outlined in the text:

In our role as leaders, we are tasked with building the foundation for our schools to flourish. A foundation alone, however, will not result in high-performing districts. It's the house that we build upon our foundation that will define us as leaders (Novak & Rodriguez, 2016, p. 41).

Calling on the work of Curtis and Clay's *Strategy in Action: How School Systems Can Support Powerful Teaching and Learning*, the authors again share their own example in using the logic model, "a tool to plan, implement, and evaluate district improvement strategies and initiatives" (Novak & Rodriguez, 2016, p. 42). True to UDL flexibility, the authors also remind readers that if a school or district has an existing action-plan template, the components of the logic model can be easily overlaid and connected to that work. One of the hallmarks of UDL is that it focuses on students becoming expert learners, and Novak and Rodriguez keep that goal at the forefront of *Universally Designed Leadership*:

For so many years, we created plans based on the actions of adults and not the outcomes of our students. We had action steps about professional development, and the success measures were defined by us completing the task. We never asked ourselves whether it had any meaningful impact on achievement. Logic models hold us accountable for student outcomes (Novak & Rodriguez, 2016, p. 46).

One of the strengths of this book is how the text itself models the UDL framework. This section about data-based decision-making and the logic model is cerebral, especially for a reader who may not be an administrator dealing with this work on a regular basis, but the text circles back at just the right times to solidify understanding, call on prior knowledge, and ready its readers for movement through the phases of implementation.

One of the greatest triumphs for teachers comes from "Chapter 6: Professional Development that Models UDL." In this Prepare phase of

implementation, administrators are called on to provide universally designed professional learning for teachers.

Collaborating with staff to define a PD calendar and PD initiatives goes a long way to increasing engagement. Our professional development choice offerings have been a great success because they are based on evidence, involved multiple stakeholders, and celebrated and elevated our teachers to increase engagement. (Novak & Rodriguez, 2016, p. 71)

This chapter delivers 10 Steps for Designing a High-Quality PD System for UDL along with their district's example of celebrating teacher leaders, utilizing a multipart series approach to PD, and supporting the people designing and delivering PD (outlined in table 6.1 Applying the UDL Guidelines to Professional Development). The 10 steps and the example of their district's work around universally designed PD, what they refer to as critical parts of "the foundation for success for all learners" will have teachers cheering and celebrating their administrators and saying, "Atlast! UDL for us!"

Universally Designed Leadership concludes by offering leaders the possibility of an unencumbered evaluation process. True to form, this section scaffolds this process through an examination and UDL alignment of the Massachusetts Model System for Educator Evaluation, sample rubrics from Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation, a district that explicitly included UDL into its teacher success rubric, and two case studies.

Returning to the analogy that great leaders are like the force of gravity, Katie Novak and her works have been a force of leadership, innovation, and inspiration for the field of education and Universal Design for Learning. Her partnership with Kristan Rodriguez and the work that resulted in *Universally Designed Leadership* are defined by a true modeling of the UDL framework, a call on leaders to be expert learners, engaging all stakeholders, leveraging UDL as a district-wide decision-making tool, and focusing on student outcomes.

Universally Designed Leadership is a must-read for educational leaders seeking to create highly functional systems that value all stakeholders and focus acutely on student outcomes.

References

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