

Universal Design for Learning (UDL): One School's Journey

Written by: Mary Donovan, Robin Gregg, Emily Hartshorne, Molly Moore Lazar, Katie Page, Carole Storro, Christopher Stulz, and Stephanie Syre-Hager

In her role as principal of Antrim Elementary School (AES) in New Hampshire, Stephanie Syre-Hager has been on a quest to create a more inclusive environment for the students in her school, as well as build the expertise of teachers to engage all students and create the foundation for expert learning. That quest has manifested itself in the exploration of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) with the staff for the past four years through their participation in the NH UDL Innovation Network. UDL is an educational framework implemented to remove barriers to learning and develop environments that provide flexibility and choice for all individuals to have equal opportunities to learn and succeed. Starting with a small “seed group” of interested teachers who quickly became committed to UDL, this work has now blossomed at the school to include the entire staff. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, they have been on a forward-moving journey to increase their professional knowledge and to move toward full implementation of UDL to support student learning.



During their first year in the NH UDL Innovation Network, 2018-2019, an initial group of five staff members from AES began to explore UDL by attending UDL Network meetings and working with the school's implementation specialist, Bill Wilmot, provided by the Center for Applied Special Education Technology (CAST). They were introduced to the basics of UDL and readily saw the potential of what a truly inclusive setting could do to benefit all students. They deepened their UDL knowledge through professional development, and they learned about and participated in Instructional Rounds, which gave educators the opportunity to observe in other classrooms and reflect on that experience. At the end of this first year, the group of five attended the CAST UDL Symposium in Cambridge, Massachusetts together, which proved to be an energizing and bonding experience for the group.

2018 – AES teachers processing Instructional Rounds

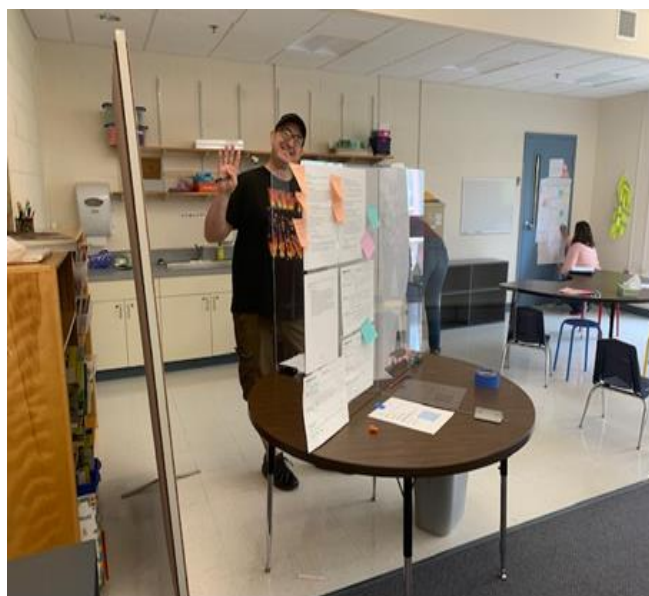
Integrated Arts Educator, Carole Storro, recalls walking past the full panel windows of the school conference room several times a day where the first UDL team would debrief Instructional Rounds. The multi-colored mosaic of post-it notes placed strategically around the room on chart papers piqued her curiosity and influenced her desire to know more about UDL. Excited to grow the movement, Principal Syre-Hager invited her to form a second team to meet and learn about UDL the following year. They participated in Instructional Rounds and the whole staff participated in a book study of *UDL Now!* to introduce all staff to the guidelines. Participating in the book study helped teachers learn individually about UDL and how they could begin to apply it in their practice. Recognizing the variability of the teacher-learners, the professional development itself was presented in a UDL way to provide multiple

means of representation, engagement, and action and expression to honor the fact that everyone was in a different place on their UDL journey.

In March of 2020, the pandemic hit, causing the school to pivot to remote instruction. Chris Stultz, the school librarian/media specialist, considers this the most dynamic and proud moment of UDL implementation at the school. Where many groups would take a break from this initiative, AES never missed a beat. Though there were a number of challenges to their usual professional learning model, they continued to keep on learning. Learning together offered the staff a sense of normalcy during this tumultuous and uncertain time in history. Principal Syre-Hager, with a team of dedicated teachers, continued to offer remote opportunities for staff to finish the book study; an updated design applied UDL guidelines to provide options for the staff to participate and learn in a remote environment.

As they transitioned to in-person learning the following year, challenges were still present with strict health and safety mitigation strategies. Despite this, the entire staff was engaged in learning about UDL through job-embedded professional development, another book study, *Unlearning*, and the addition of Lesson Design Studio, which is when colleagues collaborate to design a lesson using the UDL guidelines. The experience of participating in the Lesson Design Studio was modified to working virtually with colleagues. The participants found it interesting and helpful to take such a deep dive into one lesson plan collaboratively.

Special educator, Katie Page, found this collaborative opportunity to be supportive of her own learning and beneficial for her future lesson development. Emily Hartshorne, a first-grade teacher who was new to AES in the fall of 2019, volunteered to present a problem of practice in the Learning Design Studio that took place in the remote period of the 2020-2021 school year. She was working to offer various ways for students to practice foundational reading skills during the challenge of remote learning. Colleagues observed lessons in her zoom room and offered structured, non-judgmental feedback and ideas about how to incorporate more options for her students. "The structure of the Learning Design Studio was one of the best examples I can think of to experience job-embedded professional learning. My colleagues were there with me as I worked through a difficult problem. I was still fairly new to the school, and the experience helped build supportive professional relationships at a time that I might otherwise have been very isolated." The staff held themselves accountable for their commitment to UDL by earning their Level 1 certification on the Learning Designed platform.



This year, four years after the introduction of UDL to the school, the teachers have continued to participate in the NH Innovation Network Learning hub with the guidance of their CAST UDL Implementation Specialist. In the summer before the school year started, the teachers participated in a three-day workshop with Bill to support them in working toward their UDL Level 2 Certification through Learning Designed. In general, the teachers found that earning the Level 2 Core Credential was challenging. "It made us really think deeply about the UDL guidelines and how well we were able to actually translate them to practice," noted Principal Syre-Hager.

2021 – Summer workshop to prepare for UDL Core Credential

Although they continue to teach in a "pandemic" influenced setting, UDL coaches Chris Stultz and Carole Storro are facilitating Instructional Rounds in a creative way to continue the momentum of their work together. With pandemic mitigation strategies slowly lifting, the staff is coming together in person more to collaborate with one another and learn from CAST. The staff is deepening their knowledge of UDL by working collaboratively with their grade-level partners to create journey maps and apply UDL strategies to their lesson plans.

Above and beyond the usual work of Instructional Rounds and Learning Design Studio, the principal, in her role as action researcher, offered a unique opportunity for teachers to collaboratively build their UDL expertise through an action step she developed as part of an action research study for her doctoral program at Northeastern University. Syre-Hager created a voluntary after-school UDL Collaboration Club and established a shared Google Drive to serve as a repository of information to meet the needs of teachers in their UDL journey. The collaboration club was intended to offer time and space to collaborate and reflect on teacher practices in engaging students through UDL.



March 2022 – Journey Mapping with Bill Wilmot

Eight staff members responded to this invitation to participate in the UDL Collaboration Club. The group met twice a month (via zoom) from September through December 2021. Group discussions included ways in which members were using UDL in their classrooms, barriers they were facing, and things they were curious about related to their UDL journey. The UDL Collaboration Club was a place to share successes with UDL, which felt very motivating and validating to the participants. Members offered feedback and asked questions of each other.

Robin Gregg, school counselor, noted that the group reinforced and strengthened the connections among the staff members who participated. "It felt so good to listen to each other, to learn from each other in a supportive, open, trusting, comfortable environment. It was clear that we all respected one another, and we all were so grateful to have this opportunity to learn from each other. We were able to share our own attempts at integrating UDL principles and practices into our teaching. At times, I felt that I was at such a beginning level of doing this. But my colleagues always made me feel that my attempts were important and that I was doing more than I realized. And also, I was able to emulate some of what I learned in the group, to try things out that my colleagues had done."

Mary Donovan, a first-grade teacher, found the conversations and shared examples both supportive and inspiring. Club participants were able to help shape each other's attempts at incorporating UDL into their teaching and learning environments. In addition, the resources available in the shared Google Drive provided energy and guidance as the year progressed.

Molly Moore Lazar, a third-grade teacher at the school, joined the club in late October, but was so glad she did. "I immediately felt less alone in my personal journey with UDL. The feedback I got from my colleagues in the club helped me see where I was already proficient with my practice, and in areas where I was struggling, they gave me suggestions and ideas to try. The club was a great time to check in with colleagues and hear what they were doing in their own practice outside of Instructional Round

visits. Between the regularly scheduled professional development around UDL, the club was a great way to keep UDL at the forefront of our minds.”

All of the participants agreed that the group was intellectually stimulating and felt like a safe place to share ideas and questions. Participation in the group provided them with inspiration and concrete practices to try out in their own teaching. Moving forward, all of the participants expressed an interest in continuing to meet. It is their hope that more teachers will join in the future.

There is a sense of shared gratitude among the staff for the UDL journey that they have embarked on together. Just as any quest will present challenges and opportunities, staff have grown together and developed deeper relationships with students, colleagues, families and themselves through the process. They plan to continue actively learning more about UDL and are invested in creating learning environments that engage students in their own learning journey to become expert learners.



2022 – AES UDL Coaches Carole Storro and Chris Stultz and AES Principal Stephanie Syre-Hager present the AES UDL journey at the March 9, 2022 NH UDL Innovation Network Meeting (Pictured from left: Carole Storro, Stephanie Syre-Hager, Chris Stultz)