

Chapter 11

Practicing What We Preach: A Case Study of the Implementation of a Complex Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

Creating inclusive classrooms is a challenge in general education. To prepare new teachers for diverse K-12 classrooms, faculty at one Midwestern university redesigned their education program to prepare preservice teachers for dual licensure in general and special education. The redesign required middle childhood faculty to learn more about complex conceptual frameworks that are prioritized in school districts across the country. One of these, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), became a non-negotiable component of the new program. An essential learning outcome became preparing pre-service teachers to utilize UDL. After the program was approved, content-area faculty questioned whether they were prepared to implement the framework. Having varied expertise in UDL, faculty wondered if they were teaching UDL effectively, and questioned whether they were modeling UDL concepts with fidelity in their own teaching. Thus, the Dual Licensure Implementation Team (DLIT) was born. This case study describes the process and product of the team's effort to implement UDL with fidelity.

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INTRODUCTION

In her fifth year of teaching, Assistant Professor Lane—a well-published author in her field—was confident that her preservice teacher course was running smoothly. As teacher candidates entered the room and arranged tables for small group discussion, clear routines, procedures, and patterns of practice were evident. However, despite the appearance of an efficient classroom, Dr. Lane often worried that not all of the prospective educators under her tutelage were learning as much as they could. Some of her students appeared unclear about what they were learning. Even when they seemed to understand a lesson’s goals, she encountered them grappling with whether they were learning as she intended. This situation made her uneasy. How, she asked, can I have expertise in my content area and yet lack confidence that I am teaching it effectively?

Earlier in the semester, a colleague mentioned that learning goals needed to be communicated in ways that are understandable to each learner and can be expressed by them. Dr. Lane found this information helpful and wondered why she had not previously considered this basic idea. The interchange reminded Dr. Lane that colleagues can be valuable resources, and also made her wonder whether she might be guilty of an “expert blind spot” (Nathan & Petrosino, 2003). Was her subject area expertise blinding her to the learning processes and instructional needs of novice learners? To explore this question, Dr. Lane and her colleagues used case study methodology to investigate how a faculty learning community might make the content of their courses universally accessible. Together, the group developed models for supporting learner-diversity that novice teachers could replicate as they encounter increased diversity in their future classrooms.

BACKGROUND

The introductory vignette resulted in the creation of a teacher-educator learning community dedicated to modeling a complex research-informed framework in courses for preservice teachers. The case study reported here focuses on such a community—the Dual Licensure Implementation Team (DLIT). The DLIT was created to ensure that a dual licensure program for preservice middle grades teachers at a Midwestern university would be implemented as intended. The new program prepared students for licensure in both middle and special education. One central framework for the program was Universal Design for Learning (UDL). During the initial year of the DLIT collaboration, the team examined their own practice using case study methodology to explore how UDL concepts could improve the structure, goals, and learning outcomes of the content methods courses they taught.

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