Damon Personal Reflection Essay

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When I started this course, I had not been formally trained in Universal Design for Learning. I was hesitant to plunge in fully knowing that many educational theories are fad-like, adopted by districts based on administrator support and dumped just as quickly when the spearhead moves on.

Just before class started, I had the opportunity to preview UDL at an early-release professional development workshop in October. One administrator then came to us in November at another early-release professional development workshop and asked for our opinion as to whether this practice would be beneficial for the district to pursue in future professional development workshops. Her take was that it would help but she wasn’t willing to go out on a limb by herself and wanted our support if/when she took that step. During the first workshop, we watched the introduction video and discussed how to use UDL in general in our lessons. We didn’t encounter the class profile or meeting specific individual needs aspects in that overview. I likened UDL to incorporating multiple intelligences into lessons, where we made concerted efforts to meet all needs over the course of units rather than for each lesson. I was quite thrilled to find out that the focus of SE5581 was Universal Design for Learning, hoping that I would finally be ahead of the learning curve instead of struggling to play catch up without any of professional development trainings that are usually provided.

Week 1 was a review of my previous workshop with an introduction to the class profile tool. I got a little overwhelmed thinking about how to do a profile when I have 17 classes but was told to focus on 3-5 students in one real class or one “mashed-up” class. The more I thought about it the more I wanted to focus on my 6th grade classes but that would be too many students so I decided on one class to focus on. Then I started thinking about the 3-5 students that had the most behavior problems in my class. I believe that much of the behavior problems stem from insufficient engagement in the material which is remedied by lesson plan adjustment. I asked for help from the classroom teacher who knew the students better. As I prepared the class profile worksheet, I kept thinking about the other students who were having problems or who were good students. I decided to ask for input on all students in the class. We only had about 45 minutes to learn how the profile worked and to fill in what we could. I think this cooperative activity helped the teacher to better understand what is expected from Universal Design for Learning too.

As the weeks progressed, I started planning a unit taking into account the aspects of UDL. The big unit starts with choosing a Newbery Award book from the past and ends with a presentation that includes a book review, an author study, and a “this year in history” with standard items and a extensive exploration of one aspect of history that is of personal interest to the student. I was still more excited about this project than the students were but I tried to present their book choices in multiple modes. I didn’t want the size or cover of the book to influence their decision so I created printed book summaries. I wanted to create QR Codes that “read” the summaries or linked to book trailers but the school filters block all streaming video. I did find a safetube site where I could link to a youtube video while masking the book from the title (until it appears in the actual video) and eliminates the ads and displays of other videos that may not be appropriate and definitely aren’t part of the activity, but that is still a streaming site and wouldn’t load for the students. Instead, I needed to show these on the Smartboard while the activity was going on.

The more I work with the class profile the more I understand how versatile a tool it is. Knowing that I have some drama students, horse enthusiasts, and toy aficionados, I worked in prospective projects that addressed their talents and interests. Being aware of weaknesses allowed me to foresee where these students may have problems in the standard lesson planning and address variations that help not only those students but all students as there is variety and choice.

I had some trouble with the obstacles and barriers activity because I don’t tend to think in individual steps and was already addressing the obstacles/barriers even before I started focusing on that area. As I stated in an earlier assignment, I am a “26-plan” type of person who realizes that if plan A fails there are still 25 other letters in the alphabet. I frequently start working on plans b, c, and d even while planning plan a, but it was a good double-check to look at what might be an obstacle and be able to say “I’ve planned ahead to eliminate or reduce that obstacle!”

Looking ahead, I can see the value of knowing strengths, weaknesses, and talents/interests so when the right activity/application/resource comes along we can recognize it’s inherent value to our students. I think that it is also important to look at resources and notice what types of generic students would benefit from their use. I think that UDL gives us permission to create a toolkit of resources and prompts us to examine closely what tools from that kit would best serve the students that are sitting in front of us at that time. Maybe someday, there will be a UDL student profile form that moves with the student from class to class or some kind of suggestive evaluation like those for multiple intelligence or learning styles that provide an inventory for teachers to start from to help modify lessons to help all students. I truly feel that when we make the effort to personalize lessons to help targeted students succeed that all students benefit from the intentional analysis and added opportunities for learning.