How Universal Design for Learning Can Help Students Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

By Katie Taylor

Tony’s* bed shakes from the Supersonic alarm clock set to wake him up at 6:30 a.m. He rubs his eyes, quickly remembering that today’s the first day in his new school after moving to a new town with his mom. A light starts to flash, telling him that he needs to get up. Getting dressed for the brisk November morning, Tony thinks about what his new teacher, classroom, and peers will be like. Will he have to explain why he wears hearing aids, needs background music and noise to be minimized, needs vocabulary in advance of the lessons, captioning on videos, and more things that help him access the curriculum that he usually has to ask for? What will the other students be like? Will they be accepting of him? His mind won’t stop worrying about his new school and the barriers he may encounter.

Step into Tony’s world for a moment. Then imagine that he doesn’t have to advocate for himself. Instead, he gets to choose how he is going to receive the class content. He gets to choose how he is going to show the teacher what he has learned. Imagine that the barriers of a traditional classroom have been eliminated. The best part is that Tony and students like him fit in with others because they are not doing anything different from anyone else; everything that deaf and hard of hearing students do, other students do as well. Accommodations are built into the general

Illustrations courtesy of Katie Taylor
education lesson seamlessly. The tools they need are available to all. The students who don’t need them are not forced to use them. This is the idea behind Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

A Look Back
And Many Steps Forward

About 50 years ago while designing cockpits for fighter planes, Air Force engineers discovered the “average-sized” pilot did not exist. Each pilot was unique—each had unique measurements in every aspect. As a result, the engineers modified the cockpit to include adjustable seats and adjustable access to flying instruments (Rose, 2015). Similarly, in an ideal world, classrooms are not designed for and educators are not trained to teach the average student because the average student, like the average pilot, does not exist. Just as every fighter pilot has unique measurements, each student has unique measures, unique strengths and weaknesses (Rose, 2015). UDL allows teachers to easily accommodate every student; it blurs the lines of special education and general education. All educators work together, making the classroom and curriculum accessible in such a way that everyone is included. In fact, UDL allows teachers to set up classrooms, design lessons, and teach with every student in mind by addressing three main areas:

1. Engagement and motivation of students
2. Representation of content
3. Expression of what the students have learned

When planning for a student who
is deaf or hard of hearing, five ideas are critical in creating a UDL classroom. Teachers concerned with UDL should:

1. **Establish flexible seating.** Deaf and hard of hearing students are dependent on visual access to the whole classroom. Teachers should give many options to allow students to find a seat that works for them.

2. **Find, create, and use visual representations.** Visual representations include captions on videos and movies; these have been shown to help all students, but they are critical for students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

3. **Allow access to quiet locations.** To facilitate communication, allow students working in small groups to move to quieter locations, such as the hallway or another room. Communication in groups can be difficult for deaf and hard of hearing students, especially when it is compounded with background noise.

4. **Present the content in multiple ways.** Have materials available in print, video, and through teacher and peer interaction. Ensure vocabulary words are repeated in class discussion. Digital discussion formats are also effective. Numerous technical advances, like Padlet or lino, provide backchannels that allow students to equally and anonymously participate during discussions. This can reduce fears and ease participation for deaf and hard of hearing students.

5. **Allow multiple options for expression of knowledge.** These may include presentations with slides, Google Draw, and curation of videos. These may also include use of backchannels for questions and feedback (Taylor, 2019).
In Indiana, the Promoting Achievement through Technology and INstruction for all Students (PATINS) Project was set up to promote UDL for students throughout the state, bringing information, training, and services at no cost to educators (2017). We work in collaboration with national organizations such as the Center for Applied Special Technology, which works to improve education using flexible methods and materials through UDL.

The PATINS UDL Lesson Creator (tinyurl.com/UDLLessonPlanner) is posted online and available to all. This tool allows users to walk through many aspects of creating a more inclusive lesson. It can help educators prepare for students, even before they know who the students will be. It includes a lesson plan that is designed to allow teachers to reach students with the widest range of abilities, significantly minimizing the need for further accommodations.

While this may be a more in-depth lesson plan than some teachers might be used to, it offers a thorough walk-through of many UDL considerations. Using this lesson plan as a template to create individual lessons can help teachers develop a meaningful process for crafting future lessons. Teachers may plan one unit this way and repeat it weekly until they feel comfortable. Then they can expand the process into other subjects, units, or sections. Once educators master planning their lessons in this way, there is no need to use the lesson plan every time.

The concept of UDL has been integrated into the Every Student Succeeds Act, the federal legislation that was signed into law in 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This is a concept that is here to stay.

When thinking about the design of classrooms, consider UDL—removing barriers to reach each student, increasing engagement, motivation, and retention. UDL can ensure students have access to their curriculum and that they do not need to advocate for that access. UDL allows students to choose the ways in which they receive the classroom content; it allows teachers to design lessons to reach every student. Educators will see that what may benefit one student will benefit others. Why not have UDL available for all students?

*Tony is a composite representing deaf and hard of hearing students the author has known.

References


