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How Many Ways? Incorporating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in the Music Classroom for ALL

Some music teachers have expressed feedback about how they can simultaneously reach a diverse range of learners in their classrooms and ensembles. This is an understandable concern. This can occur in a general education classroom, integrated co-taught classroom (ICT), self-contained classroom, center-based special education program, or even in a situation where several classes may be combined during music. Unfortunately, many music teachers were never trained in their teacher preparation programs to teach music to a diverse range of learners.

Some teachers have suggested that it would be easier to separate students based on their learning needs so they can get the proper amount of attention they need to succeed. While this sounds like it would be best for our students, we need to recognize that it would mean they would miss critical opportunities to learn from each other, learn about each other, and learn together. We should be focused on creating a true sense of inclusion and belonging for ALL rather than exclusion or separation.

I prefer to use the word ALL when considering who this diverse range of learners includes. As music teachers, we teach ALL. Moreover, we may teach ALL learners within one class period alone. Included in this broad range of ALL are students with visible (classified or apparent) disabilities and students with non-apparent (hidden or invisible) disabilities.

Students with a visible disability may have legal documentation that music teachers must be aware of and incorporate (e.g., Individualized Education Program, 504 Accommodation Plan, Behavioral Intervention Plan, etc.). These will include the required adaptations, accommodations, and modifications to be incorporated into the music classroom for each student.

We should be focused on creating a true sense of inclusion

Nevertheless, students with non-apparent disabilities may not have any type of documentation. It is important to note that there are more students with non-apparent disabilities than with visible disabilities. This means that music teachers cannot wait for students to come to their classrooms with the legal documentation and only then incorporate changes to their teaching practice.

In addition to students with disabilities, included may be students who are neurotypical or neurodivergent, English Learners (EL), gifted and talented, twice-exceptional (2E), part of the LGBTQIA2S+ community, have trauma or need support with mental health, or

are in temporary housing or homeless. Every one of our students will learn and experience the world in their own unique way. It is necessary to highlight that every student will have his or her own strengths and can bring something inspirational to the music classroom.

Knowing that we will teach such a diverse range of learners, music teachers must teach in a way that reaches ALL students consistently. But how can we accommodate so many types of learners at the same time and still make high-quality music? And how can we ensure that every student gets the appropriate attention and support to succeed?

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

One suggested idea that can be applied to every type of music classroom is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Katie Novak mentions that UDL “is the expression of a belief that all students are capable of learning and that instruction, when crafted and implemented with this belief in mind, can help all students succeed in inclusive and equitable learning environments” (Novak, 2022, 19). ALL students CAN!

Consider it this way: the strategies designed for the students with the most needs will benefit ALL. If UDL were incorporated in ALL music classrooms regularly, we would have a way to reach ALL kinds of learners simultaneously. There would be no need to separate our

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students as much, creating a sense of exclusion. UDL can help build a community of inclusion.

UDL was initially based on universal design in architecture, where the accessibility of buildings was highly considered. Judith A. Jellison mentions “a universal approach in education is grounded in the principles of universal design in architecture, in the design of buildings, public spaces, and products. The fundamental idea of universal design is applied in products and environment, including teaching environments, and is studied at several centers in the United States” (Jellison, 2015, 99-100). UDL has the same consensus in our classrooms. We can make ALL aspects of our content, environment, curriculum, repertoire, teaching materials, performances, and music-making accessible for every student.

Jocelyn W. Armes, Adam G. Harry, and Rachel Grimsby mention “the principles of UDL are a guide for educators’ praxis based on the premise that all students engage in learning differently and that curriculum should be presented in ways that meet students’ learning modalities based on three core principles: provide (a) multiple means of engagement, (b) multiple means of representation, and (c) multiple means of action and expression” (Armes et al., 2022, 45). Music teachers can easily design multiple ways to showcase musical content to students and have multiple ways for students to respond. Through UDL, students can have ownership, independence, empowerment, and choice of how they learn and engage.

At the 2023 NYSSMA® Winter Conference, Elise S. Sobol and I co-presented a session titled “Requisite Understandings for Success in ALL Music Settings: Special Education and Support Services.” At the beginning of the workshop, she led an activity called How Many Ways? from *Bean Bag Activities & Coordination Skills*. The focus of the activity was to showcase that there are many different ways that we could simply hold a beanbag. This easily connected to her emphasis on showcasing that the same can be done in ALL aspects of our field.

A connecting way to consider how we can provide multiple access points is multisensory learning. Elise S. Sobol mentions, “when special music educators can present music concepts in a multisensory mode that combines aural, tactile, visual, and kinesthetic feedback, they will reach learners of all capabilities” (Sobol, 2017, 65). When planning lessons and activities, music teachers should consider creating multiple ways for ALL students to engage by using the four prompts below:

Auditory: Can they hear it?

Visual: Can they see it?

Kinesthetic: Can they do it, or can they move to it?

Tactile: Can they feel it, or can they touch it?

One of the positive highlights of UDL is that everyone benefits. Allison Posey and Katie Novak mention “the remarkable transition is that when we focus on removing the barriers, we stop labeling students and start opening the conversation that can lead to the discovery of other strategies or means to reduce the barriers” (Posey & Novak, 2020, 54). UDL can help promote equity in a strength-based environment for ALL. The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) is an excellent resource for delving more into UDL. The Center has recently updated the *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines Version 3.0* on its website.

UDL in the music classroom

So, what does this look like in action, especially in a room of 25 students? Below are some examples from my own classroom. Keep in mind that these examples are not the only way UDL can be incorporated. It will look different in each type of classroom setting. Music teachers must ensure ALL content and materials are age and developmentally appropriate.

In an early elementary general music classroom, one of the activities in my routine is called circle time during which we learn basic movements we can do with our bodies. (This eventually connects to the dance I will teach for our winter and spring performances, which are musical theatre-based.)

First, I present four visual icons for the movements on the SmartBoard (e.g., roll arms, tap knees, clap hands, and stomp feet). I will then ask students what they observe. They can respond by telling me, showing me the movement, or pointing to it. Next, we connect these movements to a song we are working on. Then students will create their own dance to perform. They can make the dance by telling me which move they want, showing me, or pointing to the icon. In this example, they communicate their observations and choices in multiple ways.

In a middle school music classroom, I am teaching the song *A Brand New Day* from the Broadway musical *The Wiz*. While teaching the refrain to the song, the lyrics are presented in multiple ways. The text is on the SmartBoard with an icon paired for each lyrical line; the sung lyrics are modeled by myself, a recording, or a peer model; a gesture is paired with each lyrical line from the refrain to reinforce the words differently, and assistive technology such as recordable talking buttons are used with pre-recorded words that students can press to showcase the lyrics.

When it is time to perform, students can sing, use gestures, point, or use the recordable talking buttons. While not every student will show the refrain the same way as the adjacent person, all students have a way to engage in a way that works for them. In this example, the refrain is presented in multiple ways, and students can perform it back in multiple ways.

In a middle school string orchestra, students are working on a new piece of music. Before students play it, the information is presented in multiple ways. The notation is visually accessible to ALL using colors from the rainbow to highlight certain aspects (e.g., rhythm, pitches, phrasing, dynamics, etc.); a recording of an excerpt plays while a visualizer is presented on the SmartBoard for students to observe the soundwaves of the music; students will use their bodies to trace the melodic contour of their part while the recording plays; and students will tap the rhythm to their part either on their knees or their music stand while the recording plays.

Afterward, when it is time to sight-read, students can play it, point to their music to follow while others play or the recording plays, or tap or finger their part on their instruments. Again, everyone has multiple ways the information is presented and multiple ways to respond. Moreover, students have a choice in the matter.

Making connections

While this is only a brief introduction to UDL in the music classroom, music teachers should start reflecting on what this would look like. The more ways we provide every student access to our content, the more opportunities for success will arise. And again, everyone

would benefit from having a music experience presented in multiple ways. We would not need to stress how we make it work when we have such a diverse range of learners in our classrooms or ensembles. We would be creating a musical experience that connects to ALL.

So, where do you start? Think about the next upcoming lesson you have prepared to teach and consider how many ways you can present the content and how many ways your students can respond. While it may sound like you are expected to create more materials for your students, in actuality these eventually become embedded into your classroom's structure and routine, and

they are always readily available. Start small. Choose one area that you can focus on first. It could be adding more visuals or having students move more to learn content.

It is also recommended that you attend the Neurodiversity and Accessibility sessions at the NYSSMA® Winter Conferences. During the past two years, it was not by mistake that there was an overarching theme of UDL in every session. This year's conference will be no different. Our sessions showcase how UDL can be applied and how ALL students can access music-making in a way that works for them.

References

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The Neurodiversity and Accessibility page on the NYSSMA® website includes a list of sessions at this year's winter conference and resources for music educators. You can view Wagner-Yeung's work on his website at www.brianwagneryeung.com or e-mail him at brianwagneryeung@gmail.com for resources or support.