

Infusing UDL into Preservice Methods Courses

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Abstract

In this study, we examined the effects and impacts of infusing UDL teaching strategies into a semester-long, elementary social studies methods course for students enrolled in a BA/M.Ed. program. Faculty planned and then spiraled UDL content into the course. We provided support to Teacher Candidates (TCs) with course instruction and materials, lesson modeling, video examples, and targeted assignments to increase their knowledge, and use of, UDL and CRT principles and guidelines in their lesson planning. Lesson plan assignments, teaching reflections, and a pre/post survey were analyzed, looking for trends in using teaching methods, UDL strategies, and connections to social justice and civic engagement. TCs were able to incorporate a variety of strategies into their assignments that indicated an understanding of UDL principles and guidelines. TCs indicated a higher level of confidence in using social studies teaching methods and UDL strategies, as well as a stronger belief in using UDL strategies, at the end of the semester.

Keywords

UDL, preservice teacher candidates, social studies, transdisciplinary, spiral curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Elementary education programs across the country are tasked with preparing teachers to teach an increasingly diverse group of students. General education classrooms are likely to have students with a variety of exceptional learning needs. Students with disabilities, English Language Learners, students living in poverty, and those from immigrant households, all require attention so that barriers to their access to high-quality education are reduced or eliminated. In this study, we worked to address the issues of preparing teacher candidates to teach social studies with a focus of social justice, while also meeting the needs of ALL students in their classrooms via UDL.

When teacher candidates (TCs) begin our teaching license program during their junior year, they complete courses that include curriculum in UDL and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). The following year, they take methods courses and complete fieldwork hours in local elementary schools. We have noticed that our TCs have limited opportunities to develop and practice the skills they learned in these foundational courses in their methods courses. In this study, we prepared and executed a transdisciplinary social studies methods class that spiraled UDL and CRT principles around new knowledge of civic engagement and social justice. We examined the effect of this study's methods as a means to empower Teacher Candidates (TCs) to:

- Teach their students to co-create an equitable world in the context of our democracy;
- Teach social studies standards-based backward design lesson planning for civically engaged youth; and
- Revisit and reemphasize (spiral) foundation course knowledge, including Universal Design for Learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002) and Culturally Responsive Teaching skills designed to help them plan for diverse learners

We also examined the effects of faculty working collaboratively and across disciplines to teach a social studies methods course by constructing and supporting the TCs' capacities to practice effective teaching at the intersections of:

- Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
- Social Studies teaching strategies
- Civic engagement for social justice

METHODOLOGY

As researchers, we were primarily interested in the process of creating, and then examining, a learning environment for the TCs that would provide a spiraled and transdisciplinary experience encompassing methods and foundational knowledge. We used a case study approach to look at the single entity of the social studies methods course. We looked critically at how TCs' beliefs and abilities to respond to diversity and the course content (focusing on TCs' developing an appreciation for social justice and civic engagement) supported their consideration of UDL and CRT in their lesson plans as a means to reach all students in their classrooms.

Our choice of a case study approach was guided by our connection to the critical paradigm of inquiry, namely that we understood "a priori what changes are needed in a situation" (Schram, 2003, p. 35). We felt strongly that the need to provide a spiraled approach to UDL led us to create a transdisciplinary methods course (i.e., UDL and CRT), and to conduct research to uncover what happened as a result. As constructivists, we believe that knowledge is developed through the interpretation of lived experiences, therefore, we looked at TCs assignments for examples of the principles we taught within the course, and to their responses to a survey examining their beliefs about UDL and its effectiveness in general education classrooms.

Participants

Our study's participants ($n=15$) were senior year TCs in an elementary social studies methods course, completing a 4+1 BA/M.Ed. program at a small New England state university. Most TCs were white and female, with two students of color and three males within this cohort. In addition to their school responsibilities, many of the TCs found it necessary to work outside of their school responsibilities. The university has a large population of first generation college students and a significantly growing population of Hispanic students.

Elementary education majors are required to take three foundation courses their junior year. These include coursework that focuses on English Language Learners (ELL), CRT, and UDL. As seniors, the TCs enroll in four methods courses. They take courses in literacy and social studies in the fall semester, and math and science in the spring.

During the fall semester, students spent one day per week in a public elementary school classroom (grades 1-5). These classrooms were in urban settings and most included students receiving services for special education and ELLs. The TCs were expected to teach at least two social studies lessons during the semester.

Table 1: Pre-and Post-Survey Results

TC's Beliefs		Degree of Agreement				
		1	2	3	4	5
Providing UDL supports in the classroom benefits all students	Pre	10	2	1	0	2
	Post	15	0	0	0	0
Providing UDL supports in the classroom benefits students with ELNs*	Pre	8	4	1	1	1
	Post	13	1	0	0	1
Accommodations for students with ELNs is the responsibility of the general education teacher	Pre	3	3	7	1	1
	Post	3	9	2	1	0
Accommodations for students with ELNs is the responsibility of the special educator	Pre	4	4	6	1	0
	Post	3	6	3	3	0
I believe most SWDs** (regardless of disability) can be educated in the general education classroom	Pre	4	5	5	1	0
	Post	5	8	2	0	0

1= Strongly Agree; 5= Strongly Disagree

*Exceptional Learning Needs

** Students with Disabilities

DATA COLLECTION AND RESULTS

Pre- and Post-Survey

TCs completed an anonymously survey at the start and end of the semester. Questions focused on:

- Perceived level of expertise in using social studies teaching methods;
- Perceived level of expertise in using UDL strategies;
- Basic knowledge about UDL; and
- Beliefs about using UDL in general education classrooms

TCs responses to the survey (see Table 1) shifted from the beginning to the end of the semester. The results showed many more TCs developed a stronger opinion of providing UDL supports in the general education classroom for all students, including those with exceptional learning needs. They also increased in their agreement that the general education teacher should be responsible for providing UDL supports within the classroom.

Assignments

TC's assignments from the social studies methods class were analyzed using an open-coding system looking for trends in using social studies teaching methods, UDL principles and guidelines, and examples of social justice. Analyzed assignments included:

- Mini Lessons – brief description of lesson to demonstrate understanding of teaching method and UDL support
- Full Lesson Plan – complete lesson using a prescribed lesson plan template
- Teaching Reflection – TC's analysis of a lesson taught in their field placement classroom

TCs included options for recruiting student interest by offering choices in texts, project materials, seating, and project presentation models in their lesson plan assignments. They also included multiple means of representation during their lessons by presenting content in a variety of ways, including smart boards and multiple copies of text. TCs were less likely to use assistive technology in their plans. The TCs did not use multiple means to provide engagement other than giving students choices, as described above.

DISCUSSION

This case study indicates that the use of a transdisciplinary model in a social studies methods course was effective in reinforcing foundational skills and knowledge from previous coursework. TCs were able to include practices outlined within the UDL principles and guidelines, albeit at an introductory level. The scaffolding of lesson plan templates, modeling, and instruction on social studies teaching strategies were effective ways to support the integration of UDL and social studies learning.

Faculty benefited from the collaborative planning and sharing of ideas and goals using the transdisciplinary model. Our shared beliefs about the importance of reinforcing social justice issues of diversity, helped us create curriculum

that in turn helped TCs understand the challenges of making their lessons accessible to all of their students.

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