

IMAGINE...



Imagine... I am in the processional walking with my colleagues after receiving my CAS and Masters Degree from Syracuse University. The first reason I was able to accomplish this was to have a means of COMMUNICATION!!



I am with my classmates in the last month before I age out of the system, 1992. My teacher and aide are wonderful and kind but did not see intelligence with any one of us. (I will recall this picture later on in my presentation.) Imagine...is so appropriate in the application to my life growing up with a disability, lack of an inclusive education, not being able to communicate until the age of 24 years, sitting in a day habilitation program part-time and a sheltered workshop the rest of the week. Knowing full well I had intelligence from the age of seven but no way to be understood. The years of frustration and rage sadly, still surfaces from time to time.

First but sadly not foremost, I am a charter member of the “Short Bus” club. My sister’s long bus arrived first and then my short bus arrived. I rode a short bus from the age of 5 to 21; then again when I attended the day habilitation program.

Imagine...I received a Certificate of Attendance in my self-contained classroom with my special education teachers, classmates and family in my segregated classroom; however, I did graduate from high school, with the permission from the school board; walked with my “normal” peers, given a school diploma - empty of Carnegie units, but was a kind gesture. It was during the graduation ceremony I observed, as the scholarships and awards were handed out, how fortunate these abled norms were; they had their whole life ahead of them, with abundant choices at their feet. I wanted an education too and someday I was going to find a way.

The “way” to receiving my education happened on July 18, 1995, when I was evaluated for Facilitated Communication and I experienced a re-birth of having intelligence attached and removing “retardation” from my medical and educational label forever!

Now with the ability to communicate, I was able follow my dream and each semester watch it unfold. The fall semester of 1998, I began my education at Penn State University; transferred to Le Moyne College, Syracuse, NY in the fall of 2001 and graduated with my BA in Psychology

in May 2006. Took a year off to consider my options and was invited to join the New York Partners in Policymaking in 2007. I was accepted for the 2008 fall semester into Syracuse University's Masters Program in Disability Studies. As I shared a few paragraphs ago, now have my Masters in Cultural Foundations in Education (CFE) and my CAS (Certificate in Advanced Studies) in my field of Disability Studies.

Within my field of study in Disability Studies, the vision portrayed of how individuals were cared for, looked upon, yet alone educated, was pretty bleak. The gains in how the disabled have been educated in the past twenty years have not been anything groundbreaking. Even today in 2012, these individuals are still not envisioned as having intelligence or competent. With all kinds of new technology and research, there is no excuse for the system not being further along.

My entry into public school was when Public Law 94-142 was in its infancy. Here those with disabilities had the right to receive a free and appropriate education, least restrictive environment and being mainstreamed and all that stuff, which all boils down to being placed in segregated, self-contained classrooms as the real hope or lack of. Once in the system, I was blessed each year with an updated IEP, when in reality it was the same as the previous year's only the words changed. The boredom for me was over the top because from the age of seven I could read but because I was and am, still non-verbal, it was like living within

a glass bubble and screaming for someone to hear me but what was being observed by the teachers and other professionals was my rage, which was labeled “inappropriate behavior.”

When I was younger, my IEP read I was to count to five for five times. So I counted to five, four times instead, which meant I did not learn to count to five and did not satisfy the required goal set out for me, so it remained on the IEP for another year.



Referring back, I want to cry each time I see it. Looking back twenty years ago, grad course after grad course finds that education, no matter how it was mandated, students with disabilities were not provided a least restrictive environment, not seen as having intelligence and academics were provided to a minority.

This article was submitted to our local newspaper on April 16, 1992 with pride by the two lovely teachers who were creative enough back then to take us out of our self-contained classroom and walk us across the street to the nursing facility and teach us the skill of cleaning. We wiped tables, swept floors and cleaned chairs. This was a once a week opportunity. All kinds of praises were sung because THIS WAS INNOVATIVE- OUT OF THE BOX IDEA! But what saddened me the most, again, no one was seeing us as having intelligence! The article stated, “the students also shop in grocery stores and malls, how to use a laundromat, and eat lunch in restaurants to make **them** ready for more community-oriented, plus get **them** ready for the working world.” Are you catching on to **“THEM”**?

The last sentence in this article finished up with this thought, “Next year this program at the nursing home will be expanded to a second day each week. The students will spend the extra time doing laundry and ironing.”

All I could think about is the proverbial three “F’s” that our society attaches to folks having a disability, Filth, Flowers, and Food. These are the areas you are placed after receiving your certificate of attendance! Hey...at least we were provided the background for success!

Mainstreaming was another false claim to least restrictive environment. This meant we were to have access to leaning environments. Our

mainstreaming in totality was taken to adaptive physical education, art, music and Friday assemblies. Sounds great until a fellow classmate is having a bad day and it lands on one of our “specials”! We were all held back in our self-contained room because of one individual’s behavior. We missed out on “educational opportunities” because we didn’t play the game, heavens you think we had disabilities, so by keeping us in the “holding pen” was a way to teach us appropriate behavior.

It is at this point where my final graduate course brought my total education to an “aha” moment. This course was entitled Universal Design in Learning (UDL). The syllabus was a mere 18 pages long; I rolled my eyes and settled in! Quite a few of the grad students in my class were teachers so they saw the information on a different level having classroom experience. At first I felt intimidated and challenged, but once it became a source and real, I did fine. UDL became, in my eyes, the hope of inclusion few of us in the past, even beyond my twenty years, have experienced.

I am hardly an expert on this topic but I believe in the deepest part of my heart that when each individual state begins to incorporate this curriculum in their districts, there will be dynamic changes in how disabled students learn and viewed by their peers and society. At this point only five states have UDL; Maine, Maryland, Kentucky, Michigan and Louisiana.

For those of you not familiar with Universal Design in Learning I hope to do it justice with the following information.

In the 1980's/1990's Inclusion was introduced. This sounded like a dream comes true when students with disabilities were placed in the same classroom as "normal" students; the down-side was students with disabilities "sat physically" in the normal classroom but did not participate in the "normal" curriculum.

In cooperation with federal legislation in the 1970's and 1980's, called for public spaces to be accessible to the growing disability community. Universal design entered the scene at first in architecture to make buildings accessible and barrier free. Ron Mace, an architect with a disability observed by having curbs cut to accommodate disabled folks, found mothers pushing strollers, children on bikes and skateboards began to use the sidewalk adaptation where everyone benefitted from it. Mace developed and formulated seven principles tied to the physical environment; universal design provides a blueprint for maximum inclusion of **all** people. When applied in higher education, it meant designing the classrooms to be suitable for learning – instruction- responsive and student-inclusive.

The beginning of UDL is an extension of an architectural movement called universal design mentioned earlier. It is the ability to fully include

all students by providing them with access to general education curriculum not simply to the general education classroom.

(<http://www.cast.org/udl/>) Ann Meyer and David Rose

There are seven principles in UDL but I am going to share three.

UDL calls for the ***integration of multiple means of representation, of action and expression*** and ***engagement into course curriculum***.

This does not mean you eliminate the need for specific accommodations for students with disabilities by providing a sign language interpreter for a deaf student. Captioning course benefits deaf students but also provides information to students who need ESL, students with learning disabilities and students who are watching in a noisy environment.

I am not versed (Masters is not in Special Education) on the information and accommodation for educating the autistic community under UDL but under the principles stated it must be inclusive, individualistic, enriched in technology by meeting their needs to academically diverse learner's by honoring each student's learning needs and maximizing student capacity.

When using natural supports make sure that 1) too much help is not helpful, 2) avoid Velcro aides, 3) think of teacher aides as supporting whole class, 4) use aides to facilitate communication and learning among students, and lastly, 5) peer support.

UDL is applied in various sectors of our lives through iPhones and Blackberries, recording our personal scheduling, access the social media, record music, and texting. It will not only provide equal footing for each individual with a disability, it will all but eliminate adjectives such as stigma, discrimination, and oppression that was so much a part of my life, it will show our society that disabled individuals have intelligence no matter how compromised they are by their disabilities.

Thomas Hehir (2002) defines ableism as “**the devaluation of disability**” that “**results in society as attitudes** that uncritically assert that is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check and hang out with (the) nondisabled...In short, in the eyes of many educators and society, it is **preferable for disabled students to do things in the same manner as (the) nondisabled...**”

When the three principles of UDL are applied and maintained a learning style for each student, it will all but eliminate ableism. The scaffolding, chunking, blooms taxonomy, natural supports, ideas that provides a basis to begin and move on from there.

For all students acquisition = proficiency = maintenance = generalization = adaption. This looks good on paper but not everyone follows this neat linear approach. Some must learn and immediately apply it to their life in order to understand the concepts.

UDL is not an agency for curing those with disabilities or helping them overcome them; it is access for general education curriculum.

A book by Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability* was included in my UDL class, here are some thoughts I feel should share and fit in.

Simi Linton...I am impressed with her insight and futuristic goals in connecting what has been made into law and how society is coming around, slowly, in recognizing the fact that people with disabilities can function well in their given sociological culture when barriers are broken down and accommodations allowed.

Over the last twenty years, the view of our culture and legislative branch of government began to move forward in addressing the rights for those with disabilities by providing access and recognition of their needs and therefore acting upon them. When Disability Studies became an integral part of the university system it became apparent how much academic departments were archaic, narrow minded and totally inadequate. They focused on behavior, functioning, sensory and cognitive issues, not the reasons behind them. The curriculum was disconnected throughout each discipline and fostered isolation and oppression.

Those having a disability were kept out of sight by having them segregated in classrooms and not mainstream educational settings with normal kids. Kind of the “long bus” and “short bus” phenomenon! As they aged out of each class, beginning with the school’s basement, they

were then continued to be kept out of public view in self-contained classrooms and eventually placed in sheltered workshops or day habilitation. It was the family's responsibility to follow through without but without any helpful guidance!

It is because disabled folks have begun to be like-minded and form a solidarity rights movement contesting the injustices done to them throughout centuries, they have been able to come together as insiders. By unearthing the history of the disability, Simi gathers this and pulls it together by redefining, identifying and naming disability in the arena of reluctance.

In my case, the resisters are mostly psychologists who resist Facilitated Communication and its process that provides me the opportunity for identity, a voice and a means to advocate for other FC users. My BA is in Psychology and I cannot understand why this method of communication is questioned especially when "best practice" is being used.

In this short article by M.G. Michael and B.J. Trezek in 2006, I found it refreshing to once again teachers and academia pulling together and brainstorming by, as the title states, "Creating ownership for students with disabilities." Dr. Chris Kliever called students with disabilities as having "citizenship"; not clients or consumers, better yet, the autistic with blonde hair; second row on the left! What a wonderful feeling for

those with disabilities to be seen and referred to as having citizenship! I love this!

Can you see Herb Lovett with his sleeves rolled up and how involved he would be? I can feel his excitement now! Barrier-free environments, the beginning of societal respect, segregation disappearing, equality, my thoughts are scattered.

Living life through the disability lens cannot be appreciated by those who function in a totally free environment. For them, their day does not begin with “barriers”. Intersectionality and life experience is so important for those who are disabled. Universal design is not a one size fits all accommodation. Because disability can be so complex, trying to use this one size fits all barrier free concept, cannot be a win-win situation. It becomes another accommodation that produces a break in the intersection of the privilege and less privileged. Interdependency in Universal Design, creates the path to access, in a classroom setting and interaction between teacher and student, interdependency is key to successfully making sure every student receives the necessary information and given the opportunity for feedback.

The only way to change societal attitudes and attach the label of intelligence is through an educational system that is open to an environment encouraging each student to explore technology, having natural supports in the classroom, everyone, disabled or not, working

side-by-side learning the same information with no barriers separating them, promoting interaction and having the same curriculum which includes everyone. Universal Design in Learning (UDL) has given me more hope and excitement for individuals with autism. When UDL is finally fully implemented throughout the United States, changes in attitudes about how disabled individuals, especially those with autism WILL FINALLY CHANGE! IMAGINE!

Thank you.