Suzanne discussing UDL: Part One

Teachers typically have a couple of questions when they hear the term “Universal Design for Learning.” So I’d like to respond to those questions.

The first question they have is, “What is Universal Design for Learning”? So let me just briefly define it. It is a term that started to be used in architecture in the mid-twentieth century when architects started to look at design features that made buildings more user accessible. For example a curb cut is one of the primary examples of a universal design feature. Or Automatic door openers, that allow easier access. Initially these two features, automatic doors and curb cuts, were designed for people in wheelchairs, but in fact they have found themselves to be useful to many users--individuals who have a cart or a baby stroller or a bicycle. So, in fact there are some features, while designed for the least abled individual who might be using that building, they are, in fact, useful for many people who are using that building.

We then saw this application, or idea, of universal design applied to technology. Many curriculum activities or materials that had a technology base and used sound, or used readers, or used font size were in fact useful to other individuals, individuals who were not hearing impaired or who had low vision. In fact they worked for many learners for whom sound or change in the visual structure was helpful.

We have now found that is also applies to designing instruction and curriculum materials. Think about what are the most user-friendly features of a material-- if they are useful for the learner who is the least abled, they possibly have utility for learners who have more abilities. So the idea is that we create pathways for students.
One example I often use is the overhead projector and having a visual representation of what is being said. That path is an essential one for a learner who has a very difficult time auditorally following what a teacher said. However, it is also helpful to the very capable student who also wants some assistance in identifying the most important things.

Bottom line? the important concept in universal design for learning is the idea of creating multiple pathways for learners. If we create multiple pathways then students will be able to follow a path that meets their needs and allows them to reach the intended outcome.