Inclusive Education in Remote Instruction with Universal Design for Learning

Luciana FRUMOS¹

¹PhD, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University,
Iasi, Romania, luciana.frumos@uaic.ro

Abstract: When schools are closed for a longer period of time, due to emergency situations, as in this COVID-19 pandemic, the educational landscape changes, so teachers and students must adapt to different remote learning solutions. Distance education has been used successfully before, with a wide range of students of different ages and abilities, but the sudden need to use technology and remote instruction for all, in order to replace face-to-face classroom interaction is challenging.

Certainly, many teachers and students were unprepared for this ad-hoc need to use distance learning. Teachers' knowledge and abilities to use remote instruction solutions can vary greatly, and so are student's readiness and their at-home technical capacity to access the information sent by their teachers. Students may be very different even in the traditional classroom, but school closures and the technological demands of distance learning can disproportionately affect students, especially those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) or at risk.

From the perspective of inclusive education, teachers are assuming new roles and responsibilities as they are expected to meet the needs of all students in their classroom. Those teachers, committed to the principles of inclusion, will embrace the challenges of remote instruction, and will try to design the curriculum having in mind all their students, regardless of their abilities, and use all the advantages that the remote learning environment has to offer. The guidelines of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are in line with the principles of inclusion and provide a useful framework for discussion.

Keywords: *inclusive education; online environment; remote instruction; special educational needs; universal design for learning.*

How to cite: Frumos, L. (2020). Inclusive Education in Remote Instruction with Universal Design for Learning. *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 12(2Sup1), 138-142. <https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/12.2Sup1/299>

1. The remote instruction context

Remote instruction occurs when teachers and students are separated by time and/or distance and therefore cannot meet in a traditional classroom setting. Offering classes remotely can help provide continuity or recover lost class time. The face-to-face learning can be replaced by remote synchronous or asynchronous online courses. Based on students' needs, different remote learning solutions can be used such as: digital learning management systems; collaboration platforms that support live-video communication or tools to create digital learning content. In their unexpected remote instruction journey, teachers can find a wide range of tools to meet their goals, but these should be seen as flexible means to meet the needs of all the students in their class.

2. Inclusive education transition to the online environment

According to inclusive education policies, teachers are expected to support learning and achievement for all the students, regardless of the differences between them. Temporarily closed educational institutions are impacting the majority of the students but especially those with special educational needs. Students with SEN may be further impacted by school closures as many of them encounter barriers in learning and participation (Booth & Ainscow, 2002) even in a traditional classroom setting.

Teachers need to adapt to the transition from face-to-face teaching experience to remote instruction. But, in this sudden change, teachers may face additional challenges related to the use of technology and device connectivity (Coy et al., 2014) and also to finding the best strategies for curriculum design in the online environment. Taking into consideration these challenges, to what extent are teachers willing and able to differentiate and address all the students in the virtual classroom, including those with special educational needs?

Meeting the needs of all the students from the community of the class is challenging and, as in the real-life classroom, a one-size-fits-all approach will not produce the expected academic achievement for all the children. This strategy can produce marginalization, exclusion and students with special educational needs may be more impacted by the shift to remote learning, compared to their peers. However, when a school is committed to supporting inclusion, it is very likely that solutions will be sought for all students, regardless of the changes that may occur in the learning environment.

Inclusive pedagogy is as an approach to teaching and learning that supports teachers to respond to the individual differences between learners without creating marginalization for the students that are treated different from others (Florian, 2014). Teachers who are committed to the principles of inclusion need to adapt to the challenges of remote learning in order to meet the needs of all students including those with SEN. The inclusive pedagogical approach can also be valid in the remote learning environment. A total transposition of the face-to-face inclusive classroom in the virtual environment, having a similar efficiency, is less likely, especially if communication systems and technology have not been used before in the classroom by either the teacher or the student.

Beyond the technology barrier, teachers must make a meaningful choice to meet the needs of all students, including of those with SEN. Two possible approaches are presented by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011): (1) the additional needs approach (that focuses only on the student who has SEN and the demand of additional support) and (2) the inclusive pedagogical approach (that focuses on all the students of the classroom). The individualized approach to inclusion in which teachers find strategies for most of the students and, in addition, find an alternative solution for those with SEN may work for a short period of time, but in the long run can lead to marginalization and exclusion. The inclusive pedagogical approach, which implies the creation of an environment with learning opportunities for everyone is an optimal solution. For teachers, redesigning the curriculum for the virtual classroom requires a proactive approach. The online environment is flexible enough to allow learning opportunities for all. In line with this inclusive pedagogical approach (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) are the guidelines of the Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018) that provide a useful framework for discussion.

3. Universal Design for Learning

UDL is still a fairly new concept. It is a way of improving teacher practice through flexibility and reducing barriers. The framework and guidelines for UDL (CAST, 2018; Meyer et al., 2014; Rose et al., 2014) guide the critical elements of teaching and learning and address a wide range of individual differences. UDL is not just for students with disabilities, it is for all the students (Hitchcock et al., 2002; Meyer et al., 2014), because a flexible curriculum will support all learners while still individualizing learning. However, the advantage is that, changes teachers will make in order to provide access and participation for students with SEN can benefit all the

children in the classroom. UDL guidelines are (CAST, 2018): (1) Providing multiple means of engagement; (2) Providing multiple means of representation; (3) Providing multiple means of action and expression. There is extensive research that supports UDL principles and practices (Rose et al., 2014). UDL principles and guidelines can be used to redesign an existing online course (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018; Tobin, 2014) and, why not, an existing curriculum that is made available online in an emergency remote learning situation. Creation of instructional materials based on UDL principles is possible for any grade level (Rose et al., 2014). Students' participation is made using clear goals and a variety of tools (Hitchcock et al., 2002). UDL focus on providing options is essential in the context of inclusive education. Both in synchronous or asynchronous online activities it is recommended (Burgstahler, 2002; Coy et al., 2014, Meyer et al., 2014; Tobin, 2014) to use multiple media so that information is accessible to all students and learner-friendly (use of voice along with written or graphic representations, slides with text or images doubled by voice explanations, practical demonstrations and discussions, digital text, symbols, graphics, with audio recordings, video with subtitles, notes sent in advance, work sheets that can be enlarged or printed, etc.). Students' progress is centered on curricular goals and not on overcoming the curricular barriers (Hitchcock et al., 2002) with challenging goals and allowable scaffolds.

4. Implications for inclusive education

In remote learning situations, inclusive education transition to the online classroom is possible and necessary. Student with SEN can participate in the online environment to a wide range of learning activities. Some barriers are inherent but teachers can proactively overcome them using the UDL framework and guidelines. Teachers' have the responsibility to select and use the appropriate solutions according to students' needs so they can reach the educational goals.

We can conclude that designing the curriculum having in mind the children with SEN based on UDL principles can benefit all students. This way teachers will facilitate learning for everyone in their class.

References

- Booth, T., & Ainscow, M. (2002). *The index for inclusion* (2nd ed.). Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education.
- Burgstahler, S. (2002). Distance learning: Universal design, universal access. *Educational Technology Review*, 10(1).

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255585355_Distance_Learning_Universal_Design_Universal_Access

CAST (2018). Universal design for learning guidelines version 2.2.

<http://udlguidelines.cast.org/>

Coy, K., Marino, M. T., & Serianni, B. (2014). Using universal design for learning in synchronous online instruction. *Journal of Special Education Technology*, 29(1), 63–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016264341402900105>

Florian L. (2014) What counts as evidence of inclusive education? *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 29(3), 286-294.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2014.933551>

Florian, L., & Black-Hawkins, K. (2011), Exploring inclusive pedagogy. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(5), 813-828.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.501096>

Hitchcock, C., Meyer, A., Rose, D., & Jackson, R. (2002). Providing new access to the general curriculum: Universal design for learning. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 35(2), 8–17.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/004005990203500201>

Meyer, A., Rose, D.H., & Gordon, D. (2014). *Universal design for learning: Theory and practice*. CAST Professional Publishing.

Rogers-Shaw, C., Carr-Chellman, D. J., & Choi, J. (2018). Universal design for learning: Guidelines for accessible online instruction. *Adult Learning*, 29(1), 20–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159517735530>

Rose, D., Gravel, J., & Gordon, D. (2014). *Universal design for learning*. In L. Florian, *The SAGE Handbook of special education* (2nd vol.) (pp. 475-489). SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446282236.n30>

Tobin, T. J. (2014). Increase online student retention with universal design for learning. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 15(3). 13-24.