

# Foreword

## **What If? Reimagining the Concept of Universal Design for Education**

Some decades ago, I was working with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in Ireland where I had responsibility for ascertaining whether the primary school curriculum should embed a diversity of ‘modern’ European languages. At one of our Council professional enhancement events, we were about to extend our learning by looking at the role of assessment in the classroom, Black et al’s work on opening the ‘black box’ of assessment (2010) was very much in vogue at the time. Dr Anne Looney, who was then Chief Executive of the NCCA, began her session by sharing that, in her view, ‘curriculum is the story that one generation passes to the next.’ That seemingly simple, but wonderfully complex, concept stuck with me and has informed my views of interrogating what story I may wish to tell as an educator. Fundamentally, the idea was that through creation of shared curricula, which came about by undefined processes of dialogue, our wider societies determine what is useful, beneficial and good to sustain a sense of identity, wellbeing and societal prosperity into the future.

But what if much of the current story we tell through our curriculum structures, our schools, colleges and universities, and how that story is conveyed through application of our current tools for learning and assessment has literally ‘lost the plot’? What if the ways in which education has been currently imagined responds to design questions that pertained to the last century, and the stories we are passing along, and the ways in which we are relating those stories, are no longer quite fit for purpose? Across the world, widening participation agendas in higher and further education have justifiably democratised access to education, but it is by no means certain that the systems and processes of learning, teaching and assessment have kept pace with the necessity to adjust to increased variability in learning requirements. Due to the global pandemic, the educational world has witnessed a once in a lifetime seismic disruption delivering a body blow to what hitherto has passed as a perceived ‘norm.’ In a somewhat simplified, but not altogether inaccurate, rendition of that norm, much of what passed for learning took place in traditional teacher-fronted pedagogical modalities experienced within shared physical spaces at defined and unified times that were determined by the strictures of university timetabling. Within a relatively short period of time, that familiar landscape for learning has shifted and the terrain looks considerably different. Of course, those differences will be more nuanced into the future, but the lay of the land will undisputedly have altered and our pedagogical toolkits will also have adapted accordingly.

As educators, where then can we turn to reimagine a more pertinent and pressing story, or how do we craft an interrelated series of global stories, that resonate with our current cultures and topographies that will ring with truth for the communities and learners that we serve? And what processes can we put in place so that story tellers and listeners can test the mettle of the tales and adjudge them to be sound

and worthy of passing along inter-generationally within our schools, colleges and universities - locally, nationally and internationally? What if, perhaps surprisingly, at least part of the reimagined story began with a dusting off of tales with an historical resonance and an exploration of the legacy left by inspiring early childhood educators who grappled with quandaries of how best to reimagine the education of children following profound societal disruptions?

The first reflection takes us to New Zealand, or Aotearoa as it is known in the Māori language. Following the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, the indigenous Māori people became subjects of the British Empire, but while ceding sovereignty to a foreign colonial crown, they had also ensured that respect for their linguistic and cultural heritages were enshrined in the treaty. Perhaps the most tangible manifestation of this is exemplified in the current New Zealand early childhood curriculum, which is called 'Te Whāriki,' which quite literally means a woven mat upon which all can stand (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2017). The curriculum seeks to identify wider universal principles that speak to cultural and national identity and, which taken together, provide potential for individuals to flourish within society. These are the principles of empowerment (whakamana), holistic development (kotahitanga), family and community (whānau tangata) and relationships (ngā hononga). These principles resonate with the UDL premise of initiating learning by providing for multiple means of learner engagement. There is a fundamental need to attend to the affective nature of education first and foremost through a recognition of where learners are currently posited and how those positionings may at times be the consequence of profound, if sometimes veiled, systemic historic injustices.

So, knowing who our learners are, respecting their diversity of ways of being and jointly seeking pathways for identifying and redressing educational inequities that create barriers to learning, is pivotal for enabling learning success. Here, there is significant scope for collaboratively exploring intersections of learner identities and for conjoining research perspectives that interrogate how UDL, along with other emancipatory conceptual frameworks, such as culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP) can assist in disrupting 'pathologized students' abilities' (Waitoller & Thorius King, 2016). Conjoining these approaches adds depth to our understanding of systemic disabling barriers that learners encounter by revealing that current inequities in outcomes are informed by wider socio-cultural and historical processes that marginalise or disempower learners. These complementary research-based strategies and reflexive practices thus provide a more holistic and culturally situated analysis of anticipatory and emancipatory design. They can also assist us in charting future pathways to learning as we negotiate cultural and societal disruptions by testing differing ideas that emerge through collaboration, dialogue and innovation.

The second reflection comes from small city of Reggio Emilia in northern Italy, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War the city was literally and figuratively devastated. It needed a new vision and sense of purpose that would help sustain its citizens into the future. This came about in the role of women in the city who set about enacting a purposeful and collaborative redesign of education for the youngest children in the city that formed the genesis of the 'Reggio Emilia approach.' Working together, these home educators realised that 'the sum was greater than its constituent parts' and they encouraged active involvement of artists, artisans, engineers and others from the wider community who could contribute to extending and enriching learning. Critically, the promotion of societal well-being acted as the cornerstone for curriculum development, and this formed a strong bases upon which to build a lifelong learning journey for citizens, empowering them to tackle social injustice and oppression.

Whilst enacting curriculum, educators in Reggio Emilia were encouraged to adopt a democratic approach that was also attuned to learner requirements. Facilitative relationships between teachers and learners were encouraged, and as Loris Maguzzi, one of the most influential thought leaders of the move-

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ment, shared: “learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water. Through an active, reciprocal exchange, teaching can strengthen learning how to learn” (Delrio, 2011 p.83). A fundamental aspect of that collaborative arrangement involved groups of young children tackling real life problems through project-based activities. This resonates today with many UDL theorists and practitioners who argue that assessments, which at times drive the learning agenda, ought to be grounded in moral, ethical, authentic and meaningful reflections of what is beneficial for self and wider society. The focus upon collaborative activities which underpin the Reggio Emilia approach, along with considered options for individualised learning, is also reflective of a commitment to recognising that there are multiple means of representing learning and many pathways that can be taken to facilitate attainment of shared learning objectives. By espousing creativity and giving voice to ‘I cento linguaggi dei bambini,’ or ‘the hundred languages of children,’ the Reggio Emilia approach also sought to open a diversity of doors through which learners could access multiple means of action and expression. The strong values-based approach evidenced in Reggio Emilia, coupled with their practitioner commitments to flexibility and facilitation, serve as helpful markers for educators who are orienting in uncertain times.

Given our global interdependence, we not only need to learn from practices and research confined to single organisations or jurisdictions but, as educators and learners, we also need to reach out and form communities of practice with others whose experiences resonate, but whose contexts are different from our own. In this way, through research and knowledge exchange, we continuously challenge, extend and enrich our own learning. The curriculum story takes us through time and changing ideas, it also reflects on the nature of the differing tools used by learners and educators alike to create new insights and knowledge. Since the inception of the UDL framework at Harvard University in the 1990’s, the technological affordances and tools at our disposal have advanced and diversified enormously. But it is important to remember that, along with accessibility in the design and application of these tools, as educators in a global community, we need to consider inequities of access to learning technologies and how imbalances can erect significant barriers to learning even within institutions, across regions and throughout jurisdictions. Such awareness prompts a constant striving for creativity and solution seeking, for example by ensuring to the greatest extent possible, UDL researchers and practitioners facilitate global knowledge and tool access through development of Open Educational Resources (OERs).

Taken together, the chapters in this important publication provide us with pointers to the future story, where educational inclusion as envisioned in the UDL framework, has the potential to be realised. This will be achieved through a purposeful engagement with the science associated with cognition and learning coupled with dialogue with learners, and an engagement with our wider communities. Educational design processes will be honed by an ever-growing awareness of learner variability and how this can be manifested differently through the life course and within a diversity of social and cultural contexts. To this end, the individual chapters chime with a shared recognition of, and respect for, identity diversities and the value these bring to enriching learning for all. The UDL framework created by Professors Anne Meyers and David Rose, along with their colleagues at CAST, provides a vital and shared conceptual source that enables that vision to be realised. But we also need to further enhance that wellspring to craft an educational tale that is in keeping with our time and that can respond to challenges within the further and higher education sectors. To some extent then, as aspirant UDL crafters of tales to be told across and between disciplines and extending between generations, the story we co-create can only be partial. It can only strive towards a promising and positive potential denouement because the future is

not in the hands of current educators but rather resides with the aspirations and actions of the emerging world shapers, our learners.

But what if, as illuminated in the enriching efforts of authors throughout this publication, our combined efforts further empower those learners with capacity to promote dignity, ownership, authorship and autonomy? That is indeed just cause for celebration as it takes us further along the journey to where, as articulated in the CAST strapline, ‘learning has no limits.’ Nevertheless, the storylines to that destination are far from certain, so empowering others to navigate more assuredly through a shared and challenging terrain is a crucial undertaking.

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