



Universally Designed Learning:
From Theory to Practice

The Centennial Success Story

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Note on Author

Frederic Fovet brings to the field of inclusion two distinct perspectives. He holds an LLB and an LLM and has previously worked as a solicitor in the UK. He also holds a MEd in Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) from Birmingham University, and has worked for over 15 years as a teacher and principal. It is undoubtedly this dual perspective that has made Frederic so passionate about inclusive educational practices. He was the Director of the Office for Students with Disabilities at McGill University from 2011 to 2015, where he was responsible for triggering a systemic, campus-wide drive for UDL implementation. Frederic is an Inclusion and UDL consultant.

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Introduction

This report offers the analysis of a success story; it examines the factors that have contributed to placing Centennial Academy at the forefront of inclusive education in Quebec. The object of this analysis is to go beyond a mere description in order to identify key characteristics that explain the school's ability to cater to the needs of a student population of wide diversity in learner profile. Every so often in a school's history comes the time to take some distance and to reflect on the significant milestones which have shaped and framed its unique flavour. It is through this reflective process that organizations become able to crystalize their identity and advance their process of growth. Centennial Academy has reached this juncture: it is, at this ideal stage, able to examine analytically what makes its strength in order to formulate its agenda and vision for 21st century inclusive education. This reflective and proactive formulation is essential in order to increase transparency and clarity of vision amongst the students who embark on a Centennial education, the parents who invest in its success and contribute to its visibility, and the teachers who weave their career development into its institutional strategy. Framing a pedagogical vision for the future, as Centennial Academy is endeavouring to do with this report, creates optimal conditions for success in the multi-stakeholder collaboration in which any inclusive schooling must occur.

Context

There is nothing exceptional about the Centennial context, but the institutional response the school has designed to adapt to this context is unique in every way. Many schools find themselves catering to the needs of a student body of great diversity because of their smaller size, the individual support they are able to offer to their learners, and the skills their staff are willing to demonstrate in matters of differentiation. Once the diversity of learning profiles increases, many schools tackle the multitude of needs they identify by quickly building a high degree of clinical expertise. It is a natural response: if the student body displays a high incidence of neuro-cognitive specificity, most educators and administrators will feel that all within the school must inform themselves on the characteristics of these numerous profiles.

This process, though it begins with the best of intentions, too often metamorphoses into the systematic labelling of students and the search for ready-made solutions that focus on diagnostic profiles. Schools that embark on such a process work within a 'medical model', and, by this, the literature means

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that the interventions and pedagogical efforts deployed in such schools seek to target specific characteristic of the clinical categories within which the students may fall: autism, attention deficit, dyslexia, etc. (Triano, 2000). Centennial did not choose this path. It bravely and proactively moved away from a medical model in its pedagogical practices; there are many logistical reasons for which it decided to take the less trodden path – all of which will be explained here; there is also an abundant body of literature to suggest Centennial’s choice is wise indeed and now places it as distinct and innovative leader in the field of truly inclusive pedagogy within Quebec.

Reframing pedagogy

The many arguments which Centennial Academy was able to identify, when deciding to shift away from medical model approaches, are a testimony to its institutional maturity, its pedagogical acumen, as well as to the clarity with which it is able to read the expectations of its learners and their parents. The landscape of inclusion has evolved rapidly in the last decade (Zigmond, Kloo & Volonino, 2009); Centennial has been energetic in staying abreast of these changes in order to develop best practices that are not obsolete or uncongenial to the millennium learner. This rich, complex analysis of its context, undertaken by Centennial in recent years, can be broken down into four main concerns.

Resource Management

Up to very recently, the diversity of learning profiles in K-12 classrooms was very limited, mostly because segregated pathways were the norm. Students requiring additional measures represented a minority of learners, adequately serviced by a handful of specialists. However, as social justice gained momentum in our society, as inclusion became the dominant philosophy, and specialized education progressively metamorphosed, the proportion of learners with diverse profiles has come to represent a large segment of our student population, if not even the majority. One size no longer fits all. Many schools, however, still attempt to navigate this new landscape by simply increasing ‘parallel’ support available outside the classroom: remedial lessons, access to clinical experts, and targeted interventions grow in size, while classroom teaching remains unchanged and presumes uniformity in learner profiles.

“Inclusive practices, in Centennial Academy’s vision, must be foremost classroom practices that do not rely on retrofitting. Resources should go to supporting every learner in the class itself.”



Centennial Academy has refused to follow this path. If inclusion is to happen, it must happen in the classroom, as part of the pedagogical practice, and cannot be an afterthought. This is a sound assessment, both from the strategic perspective of resource management and from a social justice view point: (i) there comes a tipping point where retrofitting or remedial work outside the classroom becomes so extensive and costly that it depletes classroom resources; (ii) there is little point in advocating for inclusion if, in practice, the remedial act segregates these learners through most of their day. Inclusive practices, in Centennial Academy's vision, must be foremost classroom practices that do not rely on retrofitting. Resources should go to supporting every learner in the class itself.

Sustainable teaching practices

'One size fits all' has clearly become an obsolete view on pedagogy, and yet, even forward-thinking K-12 educators often remain somewhat stuck at this initial assessment of the challenges that exist. What this realization must surely lead to is the understanding that pedagogy must change if it is to survive with any degree of efficiency. The notion of sustainability is one that is not discussed often enough in pedagogy and education, and Centennial Academy has decided to feature it centrally in its strategic assessment of pedagogical needs. It is essential for us to consider sustainability as a core concern in our teaching practices, so that the needs of all students continue to be served, so that our teachers avoid exhaustion and continue to grow their best practices, and so that our school administrations successfully nurture inclusive cultures even if our resources are finite. Focusing on the creation of sustainable teaching practices, for Centennial Academy, is an essential positioning for the 21st century, one that will allow it to address change in a proactive and constructive fashion.

The Social Model as an educational imperative

Another considerable rethink that has occurred over the last two decades in the field of education is the realization that our perpetuated cultural vision of disability and impairment is not as sound as it could be. For far too long through history, we have seen 'differences' in physical or neurocognitive functioning as individual shortcomings, shortcomings that could serve as justification for labelling and segregation. The Social Model of Disability has grown in momentum over the last two decades (Barnes & Mercer, 2003). It invites us to re-examine disability from the perspective of the environment. If we consider the way environments are conceived or constructed – be it a building, a work unit or a classroom – we quickly realize that it is the lack of 'fit' between these environmental expectations and the characteristics of individuals that becomes construed as a disability.



Disability, therefore, is a social construct and has, in fact, far less to do with the individual than with the design of the world that surrounds us. The more uni-dimensionally and rigidly-designed the environment is, the more likely it is to make certain individuals feel disabled as users. The difficulty, of course, is in translating this awareness into our daily practices. How do we begin the process of examining our classroom environments in order to identify how they can be disabling to our learners? It is a challenge Centennial Academy has accepted without fear or second thoughts. It is a reflection that has positioned Centennial Academy as an unprecedented trendsetter in the Quebec education landscape.

Students' emerging expectations around inclusion

Implementing Social Model theory into our practices is not solely a conceptual imperative, it is also a practical one that is increasingly noticeable on terrain in our classrooms. Learners themselves understand the benefits of full inclusion and demand full social interaction. Students do not want to have to visit remedial offices; they are reticent to comply with the requirement for regular meetings, outside class, with clinicians; they wish to have access to technological and pedagogical solutions in the mainstream classroom environment without having to be identified in any way.

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Centennial Academy prides itself on constantly having its finger on the pulse when it comes to its student body. It has listened to its learners and identified this vibrant and eloquent need. It wishes to adapt and embrace these learner expectations by providing fully inclusive approaches to teaching and learning.

Universal Design for Learning principles

Having identified the key factors that are reshaping the landscape of inclusion and rendering medical model approaches obsolete, Centennial Academy embarked on an active, evidence-based search for theoretical models that might fulfil its thirst for options. One such model quickly became appealing: Universal Design for Learning. UDL is not a new framework, and there is ample literature on its effectiveness as a tool to establish inclusive pedagogical cultures. CAST, in particular, has led the drive



for its implementation in K-12 in the US for some years now (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2013). Starting in 2011, Centennial Academy became more aware of UDL's immediate potential when McGill University began leading a campus-wide implementation drive with vitality (Gomez, 2015).

Centennial seized upon the chance to establish a working relationship with McGill in this field and triggered its own implementation process. This collaboration is a partnership of high level, and Centennial has since also become involved in a multi-institution project, funded by the Government of Quebec, that delves into the key motivational factors that lead teachers to embrace the UDL model (McGill Reporter, 2013). UDL, as a theoretical model, incorporates many of the pedagogical practices that are already familiar to our teachers. Indeed, UDL literature relies on neuro-psychology findings that have contributed to our understanding of teaching and learning over the past decades: Gardner's multiple intelligences (Davis & Gardner, 2012), the literature on differentiated teaching (Tomlinson, 2014), and most of the findings on the psycho-social benefits of full inclusion. UDL, however, frames these findings in a unique way: it considers this research not in terms of the individual characteristics of the learners, but more from the perspective of the format of the classroom and the design of our teaching. It is this that makes UDL so ideally suited to Centennial's preoccupations. As its vision statement clearly states, Centennial Academy 'accept(s) and embrace(s) the diversity of learning in each child'. UDL addresses this objective and focuses on one central question: how can we increase access in our daily pedagogical practices, in light of the wide learner diversity that exist in all classrooms?

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The environment can place excessive burdens on individual students and create barriers to achievement. Centennial believes in putting into place systems and structures that shape the learning environment in the optimum way for the learner. One perfect example of Centennial Academy's willingness to examine how the learning environment can be improved is its policy of asking teachers to move between classrooms, rather than requiring students to constantly change locale, as is typically the case in conventional schools. Being ready and willing to examine and improve the learning environment rather than pathologize the child has immediate and concrete repercussions on practice.

Thus, at Centennial Academy, staff do not talk about or focus on the students' disabilities, but focus rather on devising successful learning strategies. There is no need for IEPs to accommodate students, as the environment itself becomes structured in consequence. Finally, staff never refer to students in terms of code or diagnosis, but focus rather on their strengths and their successes.



There are three main principles in the UDL model. They all focus on addressing learner diversity and are conceived as tools for daily reflection on pedagogical practices. These three principles are: offering learners multiples means of representation, offering them multiple means of action and expression, and ensuring they have access to multiple means of engagement.

These principles are embedded in the Centennial Academy pedagogical know-how, and they contribute to the school's success in teaching to each learner's specificity within a mainstreamed, universally-designed and standardized classroom.

Teachers and administrators at Centennial Academy have gained ownership over these principles to such a degree that they are now woven and blended into all aspects of classroom preparation, teaching practices and administrative procedures.

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Multiples means of representation

The first UDL principle acknowledges the fact that learners each have individual ways of processing information, and that the curriculum can fail them if it adheres to one unique way of presenting material to them in class. Print is a perfect example: print can be disabling to our learners if they rely on software solutions to read. Taking that into consideration, offering our learners information and content in multiple ways, during every lesson, is essential to reducing the need for remedial intervention outside the class.

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This is a process that has been integrated fully at Centennial Academy, where teachers have a high level of awareness of the cognitive diversity of their students and proactively conceive creative ways each can access the class material in their own preferred way. Example of diversified technological tools being piloted throughout the school to ensure the availability of multiple means of representation in each class are: the use of online electronic textbooks, the incorporation of Edline into classroom practices, and routine access to laptops for all students when



accessing content and work instructions. Centennial Academy is also examining the impact and feasibility of the recording of classes and of the introduction of a 'bring your own device' (BYOD) approach, which has proven successful at college level (Jameson, Thompson, Manuele, Smith, Egan & Moore, 2012).

Another way in which the environment itself is modelled to provide wider access to students in their learning is the systematic availability of assistive technology, such as Kurzweil, in all classrooms (Anderson-Inman, 2009). Students do not have to use separate rooms to use such technology, nor do they have to disclose, make requests or identify themselves in any way.

Multiples means of action and expression

Learners also have individual preferences in the way they respond to classroom instruction and contribute to the learning process. Some students will have highly developed writing skills. Others may be able to demonstrate their knowledge and skills more adequately orally. Others still may prefer, because of anxiety, shyness or their own cognitive characteristics, to contribute to the class virtually on web-based platforms; or, they may wish to be creative and produce media-based responses to the classroom objectives.

Centennial Academy staff have been trained to be conscious of this diversity and are encouraged to conceive creative ways to offer students, as often as it is possible, multiple ways to express their knowledge and demonstrate their skill acquisition. On terrain, the second UDL principle features prominently in the reflection teachers are encouraged to undertake at Centennial Academy with regards to evaluation methods. Tests and assessments that are conceived in a uni-dimensional, rigid and non-diversified format often reflect the teacher's preferred cognitive process, without taking into account the full diversity of the student body.

Centennial Academy places a strong emphasis on the creation of assessment methods that fully reflect the multitude of ways students may be most competent in demonstrating their skills. This is what enables the school to proudly state, in its vision statement, that it wishes 'to become the preeminent school that empowers learners to conquer the challenges of learning'. Another example of Centennial's innovations in the area of action and expression is its exploration of the 'flipped classroom' model. Under this initiative, students are challenged with problems

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that require them to demonstrate their integration and use of complex skills in class, rather than at home, while homework focuses instead on more conventional and autonomous mechanisms of review and consultation of material.

Multiple means of engagement

Learners also have very specific preferences when it comes to engaging in the learning process and in the classroom dynamics. This often represents an obstacle in conventional classes, where, again, teachers may have very narrow and rather traditional expectations concerning learners' engagement. The Centennial Academy classroom relies heavily on a reflective understanding that students need to be offered multiple ways to engage with knowledge. They have preferred roles in the learning process, and these preferences are taken into account in the vision and definition of successful classroom involvement.

For example, some students may be very quiet in class, or may even be non-verbal; however, this does not mean that their engagement in the class is impossible. It is by being creative and drawing them into the pedagogical process, in flexible ways that embrace their individual profile, that teachers can enable these learners, rather than disable them (Basham, Meyer & Perry, 2010). This extract of the Centennial Academy strategic statement perfectly encapsulates this institutional commitment to creativity in the design of learning experiences: 'Together, we help students become autonomous and resilient learners through innovation and collaboration'. This objective echoes much of the research literature produced by CAST, which points out that applying the three UDL principles not only widens access to learning but also leads students to become 'expert learners' (Ralabate, 2011); by this, researchers argue that the students exposed to reflective pedagogy themselves gain a deeper understanding of their learning processes.

Emotions and behaviour

UDL is not solely focused on the inclusion of learners with diverse cognitive profiles. The three UDL principles have been considered from the much wider perspective of diversity within the classroom, including emotional and behavioural difficulties. The work of Jennifer Katz has been eloquent in demonstrating how considering teaching practices through the lens of the three UDL principles allows teachers to reach out and engage students who might otherwise have been alienated because their psycho-social profile did not fit the mainstream expectations (Katz & Sugden, 2013). David Rose, from CAST, has also recently been particularly convincing in explaining and illustrating how, if the curriculum can disable students because of the way it is designed and delivered, then, similarly, students with emotional and behavioural difficulties are often the ones marginalized, because the



conventional teaching format gives these youngsters no second thoughts. In this respect, the most profound disability may indeed, as David Rose claims, be an emotional one (Berdik, 2015). Centennial Academy considered this dimension early on in its pedagogical rethink and it has devised effective, practical, hands-on ways to ensure teachers consider the full array of student behaviours and emotions when determining the delivery of teaching content or evaluation methods.

At Centennial, this reflection on ways to widen access to learning for all students, regardless of their emotional needs, is not left to the individual initiative of teachers; it is woven into the school's procedures and practices in order to achieve a systemic, whole-school adoption. This means that emotion is addressed and processed by teachers as a variable that is matter-of-fact and expected, not an oddity that unsettles them and requires exceptional measures, as too often is the case in conventional schools. This awareness exercise is constructively integrated in Centennial Academy practices through a routine teacher feedback grid on each learner, a grid that monitors not just learning but also emotional wellbeing and the successful 'fit' with the teaching format.

Behaviour and emotional management are also addressed proactively by Centennial Academy teachers, who serve as coaches; by presenting resilience, positive social engagement and perseverance as teachable goals and skills, Centennial teachers are trained to move away from a punitive approach to behaviour, one that might result in labelling the student. Instead, they approach behaviour from an ecological perspective, within which a student with abilities is seen as interacting with an environment. He or she can be coached to improve his or her mastery of the skills that eventually allow for a better 'fit' with this environment.

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Cultural diversity

Although much of the interest around UDL has thus far been focused on neuro-cognitive diversity and on the model's capacity to include all students irrespective of their learning profile, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the UDL principles are also extremely useful to create an inclusive teaching environment for students of other cultures (Dalton, Proctor, Uccelli, Mo & Snow, 2011).



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Learning styles can bear the imprint of cultural backgrounds: ‘one size fits all’ is not an approach which is conducive to inclusive pedagogical outcomes with Indigenous students, for example, or recent immigrants; second-language learners also have specific needs and expectations that require us to rethink access to learning. UDL is an excellent tool to allow us to reflect on what multiculturalism means in daily pedagogical practices. Although reflection is only beginning in the province around this topic, Centennial Academy feels that the journey it has undertaken has equipped its staff with exceptional practices to address diversity in the classroom in all its forms. This reflection has certainly already allowed Centennial to offer students from both the French and the English sectors an exceptionally congenial school experience.

Standardized practices

The remarkable and unique dimension in Centennial Academy’s adoption of the UDL model is the fact that, throughout this pedagogical reflection, change has been integrated and implemented in a whole-school fashion. The UDL principles have been woven into Centennial Academy’s pedagogy and procedures not only vertically, at all levels of the school’s operations, but also horizontally, through systemic adoption by all teachers individually. Centennial Academy is one of the only schools in the province having attempted and successfully tackled inclusion through a whole-school approach. In many pedagogical environments, such efforts are left to individual initiatives from teachers, in an unstructured momentum. This can produce some remarkable, anecdotal, ad hoc outcomes, principally as a result of an exceptional individual connection between teacher and student, and of the coincidental successful and congenial match of personalities. While such outcomes and anecdotal illustrations are encouraging for all advocates of inclusion, they are not necessarily reassuring for individual students or their parents – who cannot be ensured such a remarkable student-teacher match will be available to them.

At Centennial Academy, expectations of inclusion and access are purposefully not left to chance; they are incorporated into policy and daily practice and framed as teaching imperatives, in order to ensure that each child has equal access to such

“At Centennial Academy, expectations of inclusion and access are purposefully not left to chance.”



winning conditions (Courey, Tappe, Siker & LePage, 2012). Interestingly, scaffolding in this respect is not solely used to support students, it is also used by teachers as a tool for their growth and their professional development. Centennial Academy indeed sets aside time for teachers to step back, reflect and share UDL experiences within faculty learning communities (Spooner, Baker, Harris, Ahlgrim-Delzell, & Browder, 2007).



Conclusion: looking to the future

Moving away from a 'medical model' approach to address diversity in learner profiles is a process which can be onerous on an institution; it requires a reflective distance on practice and a desire to trigger proactive and creative transformations of the classroom experience. Many schools never reach this point of transformation for simple lack of time and resources. Centennial Academy has successfully undertaken this remarkable journey and is now in a unique position to reinvent inclusive pedagogy for the 21st century; it stands exceptionally equipped to address the expectations and needs of both students and parents in a rapidly changing learning landscape. Centennial Academy has been so proactive and innovative in this journey that it is now also exceptionally positioned to become a hub of excellence in UDL implementation and inclusive teaching practices.



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