During my eight years as a teacher and librarian in public schools, I've had a wide variety of professional development experiences and each time I try to participate with an open mind. I must admit that at times, I've said to myself, "Did this instructor ever actually teach a class of elementary students?" regardless, I consider myself a lifelong learner, and it gives me great satisfaction to apply new knowledge to my teaching. Some of these experiences have helped me to make a lasting impact in the learning of my students and some have not.

EDT 517, Universal Design for Learning excited me from the very beginning. The term Universal Design for Learning (UDL) adapted an architectural label, Universal Design. In architecture and product development, Universal Design anticipates and plans for user variability. The same holds for Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL stems from a broad base of research in neuroscience and pedagogy. It addresses the affective, the recognition and strategic networks in the brain by providing for multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression in learning environments. When using a UDL framework, educators plan for patterned variabilities in learners by removing barriers within the curriculum itself. Instead of requiring learners to change to meet the demands of the curriculum, UDL emphasizes the deliberate development of a curriculum to address patterns of variability in learners. UDL makes sense!

Teaching involves so much more than I envisioned eight years ago. How to motivate and engage a group of students with diverse strengths, weaknesses, needs, and exceptionalities in a way that is meaningful to them is quite a challenge. In the past, it was daunting to think about differentiating instruction for the 800+ students that entered my library each cycle. Realistically, it would be impossible. However, by using the core tenets of UDL, multiple means of engagement, representation and action/expression I can design lessons that remove barriers for the highest number of students at once. As I learned from the course text, it means that a UDL teacher can plan for patterns of variability across learners and provide a curriculum that has corresponding flexibility. This flexibility amplifies the natural abilities of our students and reduces unnecessary barriers and enabling me to customize easily for each learner. Of course, there will be a need to make on-the-fly changes or provide innovative single solutions. But with most of the variability addressed before instruction begins, teachers will have the time and attention to devote to this. Translation, I can design lessons that will meet the needs of my students by removing barriers for all. What is necessary for one can benefit all!

In a world where new technologies appear each day, barriers to learning become less daunting. Neuroscience tells us that there are observable patterns of variability and emerging technologies can address many of these. Even in schools where many students experience economic difficulties, free technologies and apps abound. I've included links to some of these under the "For Colleagues" tab on my homepage, including a curriculum check tool from the Center of Applied Special Technology (C.A.S.T.) that enabled me to adapt library lessons in ways that I did not think possible.

As a librarian, I have a tremendous interest in the development of early literacy. I've had the privilege of attending two weeklong workshops by the Teacher’s College Reading and Writing Project, and it was evident to me that UDL played a part in the success of this project. I was hopeful that literature addressing UDL in the context of early literacy existed. The literature review included under the "For Colleagues" tab is the result of my search.

While I’ve been able to revise lessons that I've taught for years that remove many barriers for my students, my main concern involves the area of standardized assessment. As educators, we can incorporate multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression in our classroom, but students in our country are still required to take standardized, one-size fits all assessments. How can we as educators, provide multiple means of action and expressions to students when these types of evaluations still exist. When an annual standardized test measures student success, how can we allow for different means of expression and action in our classrooms? Do these assessment experiences prepare our students to face the challenges of 21st-century with its demands for flexibility and innovation? Solving this puzzle will be vital to the future success of our students in this wondrous age of information and technology. Don't you agree?