

**00:04**

Hey, everyone, this is Katie Novak, and you're listening to the education table where we tackle your questions about inclusive education in ten minutes or less. Today, we're diving into a question many of us have asked ourselves. Does it make sense to implement UDL in the classroom when standardized tests do not offer the same options to our students? I'll share a story, talk about some key stats, and then provide strategies that will help you to prepare your students for those standardized tests without compromising the principles of UDL and accessible instruction. So let's get started. If you know me, you know I love running. Ask me about my perfect race conditions and I will tell you I want a very flat road, temperatures between 45 and 70, and I have some must have conditions.

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My saucony ever runs a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, scratch hydration, and lots of complex B vitamins. That is the secret sauce. But as we know, race day conditions are rarely perfect. And sometimes I signed up for races that simply don't have the conditions that I prefer. The weather is too hot or cold, or the course is full of unexpected hills. Or maybe I have a blister and my shoes just don't feel right. Even in these less than ideal conditions, I have to be ready to adapt and perform my best. In teaching, we actually face very similar challenges. We cannot yet change the fact that standardized tests do not provide the same accommodations or the same flexibility or the authentic tasks that students need to really share their learning.

## **01:38**

But just like in running, there are things that we can do to help our students put their best foot forward, even when we have less than ideal conditions. The question is, how do we do that? Let's dive into the research. The sad reality is that standardized assessments appear to be here to stay, even though they often contain barriers that prevent students from showing what they truly know. It is part of my life's work to try to ensure that if these standardized assessments continue to exist, that they offer the same flexibility and the same tools that we as professionals can use in our lives when learning and sharing what we know. But I digress. Let's dive into what we know can be really significant barriers for students to share their learning on a standardized test.

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There was a study published in psychology in the schools that shared up to 15%. 15% variance in student test scores can be attributed to test anxiety. This shows how incredibly flawed an assessment can be. That 15% of variance can be attributed to the mindset of approaching the test. Now, as an educator, I will not teach in an inaccessible way to prepare students for what is often an inaccessible test. Instead, I'm going to universally design instruction. I'm going to help students recognize the authentic pathways they can take for learning, the materials they can use, how they share what they know. And then ultimately I want to prepare them for the realities of the test and help them adapt and to, again, do as well as they could possibly because they do have the knowledge and the skills built in a more flexible way.

### **03:16**

So let's dive into the strategies that will give us the best chance of doing that. Now, one of the most important things we can do is to be really honest with our students about the purpose of testing. We have to let them know why these tests are designed, how they're used. We have to highlight the potential barriers and limitations so they know exactly what they're going into. We also want to make sure that we're giving them test taking strategies, and we need to help them build those coping strategies so that they're approaching the test with a more positive, resilient mindset, recognizing what the test is trying to do, and they have the tools to do it as well as they can. Ultimately, we have to keep our expectations high.

### **04:02**

We have to know that all students can and will be successful if we get the conditions right. So here are six actionable strategies. One channel, social emotional learning. We need to create classroom environments where students feel comfortable talking about test anxiety. We have to normalize that it is incredibly stressful to have to sit down and do this kind of performance in 30 minutes. It is rare in a discipline, in the nature of any discipline, that we are timed and we have to show what we know without any resources available to us. So ultimately, we need to share with students that it could be very stressful. There's lots of things that are stressful in life and to start talking about. What are some of the coping mechanisms we use?

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I know that I like to do box breathing when I'm feeling, like, really stressed out before a big keynote, I'll often do box breathing, which is essentially dragging my finger up for 2 seconds, across for 2 seconds, down for 2 seconds, and across again for 2 seconds, kind of making a box maybe on my upper leg or on my computer, and I breathe in for two, breathe out for two, breathe in for two. But that works really well for me to get ready for something that may be a little bit stressful. I often tell myself, too, that anxiety is really good, that it's like a little buzz that will help me to perform that. Hey, if I wasn't feeling a little bit antsy and itchy about this, then it would show that maybe I was too comfortable with it and I was challenging myself.

## **05:26**

So we have to talk about that. It can be stressful, and there are things that we can do when we are stressed out to show up in the best way that we can. The second is that we have to teach test taking strategies. One thing that's great is to encourage students to review questions before they dive into a text or a data set, for example, so they have a purpose for reading. If there's text. Students who struggle with reading stamina can write down the questions on scrap paper, maybe, and that can give them a purpose for reading. It helps to focus their attention. It reduces the need to have to reread multiple times. So again, think about all those strategies that we can use so that we are more efficient and more focused on the test. The third is to use exemplars and rubrics.

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Show students examples of as many standardized test questions as you can get your hands on. Lots of student work, all of the different rubrics. It really demystifies what examiners are looking for, and it really helps students to think about what is the task, what is the purpose, who is their audience. You can even use AI tools like a chat GPT to generate examples. You can share a standardized testing rubric with chat GPT and say, could you give me an exemplar at every level of this rubric? And then you can give them to students and say, imagine that you're grading this. Where does this fall on the rubric? How do you know? It allows them to provide feedback to the robots, but also their internal this feedback, really with their own answer.

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The next thing that you can do is to practice test taking, not in a way that's going to count towards their grade, but that allows students to think about how they can be successful with the limited resources. So, for example, we cannot give students graphic organizers in many cases, but we can teach students how to create graphic organizers to help put their thinking in a way that's more organized. We also can't give manipulatives. Maybe students can, you know, pull up little pieces of scrap paper to help their thinking, or they can draw, you know, visuals to help with their thinking. We cannot give them pre made tools, but we can absolutely empower them to visually organize their thoughts and apply different problem solving strategies as they're working. Now, the fifth step here is to really think about building digital literacy skills.

## **07:42**

I know certainly that technology absolutely can create barriers to students, and we know that they can be a big distraction. But also many of these assessments are computer based, which means that students need to regularly share their learning and their thinking using digital devices. So keyboarding games like Nitro type or other digital tools can get students more comfortable with like the online test interface. And again, the more practice that students have, the less anxious they will be when they see these things when it counts. The last number six is to understand the psychology of multiple choice tests. This can be such an amazing way to prepare students. We have to educate students on how multiple choice tests are designed. How do you create a great multiple choice question? Then we can teach them techniques like the process of elimination.

## **08:35**

But a really fun classroom activity can be to teach students about essentially the psychology of multiple choice test design and have them create their own multiple choice questions using any text that they choose, maybe their favorite song lyrics, or maybe a data set they create, but then having them peer review the quality of the questions. Because ultimately, if you know how a great question is written, then you can begin to analyze and try to figure out what are the likely answers based on what we know about how these questions are written. So this not only helps students understand how tests work, but it also helps to build their critical thinking skills. So again, there are so many different tools, so many different strategies, but we don't want to wait until right before a standardized test to share these.

## **09:22**

We can absolutely intersperse them throughout the year so that students not only have opportunities to learn in universally designed ways, but have practice in transferring their knowledge to less accessible mediums, as long as it is not negatively impacting a student's grade. So ultimately, while we can't yet control the design of standardized tests, we absolutely can control how we prepare our students for them. By implementing UDL aligned strategies, we can make sure that students are equipped to handle whatever comes their way, even when it is less than ideal conditions. Remember, it's not about making standardized tests easier, it's about empowering students to succeed, no matter the challenge. Thank you so much for tuning into the education table.

## **10:15**

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