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Hey, everyone, this is Katie Novak, and you're listening to the education Table, a micro podcast where I answer your questions about inclusive education in ten minutes or less. In today's episode, we're going to explore the dynamic duo of universal design for learning, UDL and differentiated instruction, or Di. Let's get started. So recently I had an opportunity to connect with the brilliant doctor Carol Tomlinson, the mother of differentiated instruction, and she is just so thoughtful and so reflective. Ross Romano from the authority podcast connected us and interviewed us on similarities and differences and connections between UDL and differentiated instruction. And after a couple hours of chatting with Carol, we concluded that in the inclusive practice family tree, UDL and Di are cousins who, after four decades, have reunited and cannot be separated. So I wanted to share some of our conversations.

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Biggest Aha's about the relationship of UDL and Di. Now, first, because of the evolution of UDL and Di, it's very difficult to answer the question, what is the relationship between the two frameworks? Ultimately, Carol Tomlinson said, I'm not sure it matters because we're both working towards the same goal of creating flexible classrooms that work for all learners. So I shared my interpretation with her that UDL is focused on a really proactive design or a blueprint for a lesson and learning environment that would work for all learners, while differentiated instruction takes a more responsive approach to finessing what is universally designed to ensure that it works for all learners in the room. And Carol said she had absolutely no problems with that distinction and also noted that as Di has to evolve based on what works for students.

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She is now describing the framework as proactive responsiveness, which blurs the lines a little more between the two frameworks. But regardless of the overlap, both frameworks have the potential to really transform teaching and learning. So I want to talk about how these cousins are a little bit different as it relates to their origin stories. UDL is the cool techie cousin because it originated from CAST, which was the center for Special Technology, which was a view of how assistive technology could help learners with disabilities be included with their peers. So it focused first on how do we recognize barriers in the environment and leverage really innovative technologies to ensure that all students were included. So the focus from the beginning was a really proactive design process that used innovative and assistive technology to support all learners in accessing grade level instruction.

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It really helped to move educators from identifying student deficits to thinking about deficits in the environment and then eliminating those barriers through design. Now, think of differentiated instruction as kind of the big picture cousin. The origins are not so much in technology, but it came from recognizing that as classrooms became more diverse and students had different needs, teachers had to be very responsive to those needs, to provide targeted support so that there were challenges for students who needed them and support for students who needed that. And the goal of DI has always been to create a really balanced, holistic approach to teaching and learning by harmonizing the learning environment, the curriculum, assessments, instruction, and the management of classroom routines to be really responsive to the needs of all learners.

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So this requires targeted instruction, individualized support when necessary, and flexible grouping and regrouping to make sure that all learners get what they need. Now, both of these frameworks require second order channels, change or adaptive change, which is a deep, fundamental system transformation that pushes back against one size fits all learning. So we're going to dive into a little bit of research on the problem with one size fits all learning. The benefits of both universal design for learning and differentiated instruction are well supported by research, but the lines between the frameworks, as I shared, continue to blur. What we do know, however, is that traditional one size fits all instruction is not effective. We know that not all learners need the same thing.

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They don't learn in the same way, they don't share what they know in the same way, because ultimately there's this humanness and individuality in learning. I would like to read a section from an article in the Hechinger report which really discusses the problem with one size fits all instruction. It says, for centuries we have believed that there is only one way for students to learn. Go to school, sit at a desk, do what the teacher says, and take tests. We have operated schools as if they were industrial factories with teaching and learning practices that mimic assembly line and batch processing manufacturing. But we can no longer rely on the methods of the past. Today, we need more students achieving at high levels to ensure a more equitable and prosperous future for our communities.

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Schools need student centered strategies rather than top down, one size fits all approaches to education, and both universal design for learning and differentiated instruction really try to address the problems with that one size fits all factory model of education. But how do you begin to shift practices towards these more inclusive frameworks? So let's dive into three concrete strategies. First, before you meet your learners, take time to unpack your standards and goals and understand when students are taking your class. What really is it that all students have to know and what they have to be able to do? Really unpack the goals and the standards of the course and consider the ways that students can learn and share what they know. This requires us to really think about goals and barriers and be really creative and flexible and innovative.

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Basically, we're going to ask, are there any barriers to this one size fits all design, given that I have a really inclusive classroom and how do I eliminate those by providing different and this is where it's really valuable to use UDL as a lens to approach planning, to ensure that there are multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression. So all students have options and choices. The second strategy, which is important in both UDL and differentiated instruction, but there is more of a focus in DI on getting to know your students. So differentiated instruction requires teachers to leverage a proactive response to student needs.

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In our conversations, Carol Tomlinson said, given the group in front of me, how do I tinker with curriculum and instruction to ensure that this class meets the needs of all students and to do this well? Tomlinson reminds us, you really have to make an effort to get to know students regardless of how big your class is. And she actually said, if we want to know them, we will know them, we'll make an effort to know them. So differentiated instruction places a little more emphasis on customizing instruction for the students that you serve, which is absolutely necessary to ensure that a universally designed lesson or environment or blueprint works for the learners in front of you.

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So all of you can imagine that I may be able to universally design a lesson that works really well in my class, and then I give you that lesson and suddenly you say, oh my goodness, this isn't working quite as well. And it's you need to make adjustments for your learners because you have to differentiate the design of that lesson and provide more support based on the students you're serving. The last concrete tip, and this will work for both UDL for really proactive planning and differentiated instruction and getting to know students and their interests and their needs ultimately. The third concrete strategy is to embrace all kinds of data. Both UDL and Di require the use of data to recognize and eliminate barriers.

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So regularly collect and analyze student data, so you know where students are excelling and where students are struggling, and you know what works for who, when, in what context. And you can use this data to continually reflect your teaching practices, to make necessary adjustments so all students have what they need as they work towards the goals of a universally designed lesson. So this data driven approach helps with UDL, but it also helps with designing that customized, individualized support to students so they can all succeed. So UDL and differentiated instruction are incredibly powerful frameworks which, when used together, can revolutionize inclusive education. Historically, we have discussed the differences and maybe even put them in competition with each other, but as both frameworks continue to evolve, those differences become less and less important.

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Ultimately, both frameworks are crucial in transforming education from a standardized test focused endeavor to one that prioritizes students holistic development and high levels of learning. As I learn more about DI and how it continues to evolve, I will be sure to update you here, so please subscribe for updates on new episodes. Thank you for joining me at the education table. Be sure to check out the show notes for more resources on UDL Ndi. Until next time. Onward.