Case Study: Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Culturally Sustaining Education, and Autohistoria-Teoría

Introduction

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a flexible framework to engage diverse learners by emphasizing multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement. When connected with Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education (CR-SE) and autohistoria-teoría (Anzaldúa, 2015)—a practice of theorizing from lived experience—UDL extends beyond accessibility. Together, these approaches cultivate learning environments that are not only inclusive but also deeply transformative, validating students' lived experiences as critical sites of knowledge production.

This case study explores how these frameworks converge and how educators can curate curriculum, assignments, and assessments that build braver, more reciprocal learning communities.

Theoretical Frameworks

Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education (CR-SE)

- Title 22 of the Pennsylvania Code requires the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) to establish professional standards for educator preparation in Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education.
- CR-SE emphasizes equity, inclusivity, and reciprocity, equipping educators to recognize and affirm the cultural identities and practices of their students while explicitly working against deficit-based approaches.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

- UDL promotes learner-driven engagement by anticipating variability and offering multiple modalities of instruction, assessment, and participation.
- It values the stories, testimonios, and prior experiences that learners bring into the classroom as core to the co-construction of knowledge.
- Fundamentally, UDL provides the tools to bridge the structural gaps that often arise when attempting to sustain culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classrooms.

Autohistoria-Teoría

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- Gloria Anzaldúa's framework highlights personal narrative as theory, demonstrating how lived experiences, cultural memories, and identity negotiations serve as epistemological anchors.
- When interwoven with UDL and CR-SE, autohistoria-teoría provides a methodology of reflection and self-inquiry, enabling learners to recognize themselves as theorists and knowledge creators.

Intersections: UDL & CR-SE

1. Centering Testimonios as Knowledge
   a. Lived experience becomes a legitimate body of theory, and classroom knowledge is co-authored by students and facilitators.
2. Critical Self-Reflection as Motivation
   a. Reflection activities—such as digital storytelling, journals, or dialogic circles—invite learners to connect internal values with academic content.
3. Access and Flexibility Beyond Traditional Frameworks
   a. UDL provides the structural tools—multimodal texts, scaffolding, creative assessments—that CR-SE requires in order to honor diversity as an asset rather than a barrier.

Curating a UDL Model

Facilitating UDL curriculum requires reciprocity, dialogue, and shared accountability between students, educators, and institutional support systems (e.g., Disability Services Offices, technology centers). Key commitments include:

- Curriculum as Co-creation: Students actively contribute to shaping assignments and themes.
- Safety & Vulnerability: A climate of trust where students feel courageous enough to share personal experiences without fear of erasure or tokenization.
- Asset-based Pedagogy: What learners bring in—dialects, cultural practices, alternative literacies—are seen as integral, not supplementary.
- Reciprocal Knowledge Production: Both instructor and students share learning responsibilities, creating new epistemologies (CA Dept. of Ed.; NYU, 2023).

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Tips & Reflective Practices for Implementing UDL

Multi-Modal Learning

- What to Provide: Text (print + digital), audio narration, captioned video, infographics, interactive simulations.
- Reflective Prompt: What 2–3 multimodal resources could enhance my unit design so all learners have multiple entry points into the material?

Connecting New to Prior Knowledge

- Strategies:
  - Begin lessons with "cultural hooks" (stories, artifacts, lived examples).
  - Invite students to reflect on "where they have seen/experienced this before."
- Reflective Prompt: What opportunities exist within my curriculum for students to map new concepts onto their community experiences?

Offering Choice in Assignments

- Practical Example: In a history course, a response assignment could allow a student to:
  - Write a paper, record a podcast, create a visual timeline, or produce a digital zine.
- Reflective Prompt: In one existing assignment, how can I design three distinct modes of response?

Feedback Loops

- Strategies:
  - Peer review in multiple modes (written, video, verbal).
  - Iterative assignments where feedback leads to revisions.
- Reflective Prompt: What structures enable frequent, low-stakes feedback that emphasizes growth rather than grades?

Assistive Technologies & AI Integration

- Tech Tools: Spell-checkers, graphic organizers, AI-assisted brainstorming, accessibility apps, captioning software.
- Reflective Prompt: How is AI framed in my classroom—as *shortcut*, *scaffold*, or *tool for creativity*?

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Assessments as Relationship-Building

- Options: Exit tickets, reflective openers, multimedia portfolios, flexible exam formats.
- Reflective Prompt: How can I explain the "why" of assessments to students so they see themselves as partners rather than passive recipients?

Braver Classroom Spaces

Drawing from brave spaces pedagogy (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Brown, 2025 podcast), cultivating classrooms as sites of risk-taking, authenticity, and courage requires educators to:

- Normalize vulnerability as growth-oriented, not punitive.
- Co-create classroom agreements that recognize both safety and bravery.
- Open doors for student voice in reimagining participation norms.

Reflective Prompts:

- How am I signaling to students that mistakes are not failures, but pathways to deeper understanding?
- What co-created agreements can invite learners into shaping classroom culture?

Designing Assessments with UDL & CR-SE

Effective assessments in this framework should:

- Use clear and accessible language across symbolic systems.
- Target specific learning outcomes without unnecessary gatekeeping.
- Allow multiple demonstration pathways (performance, narrative, product, reflection).
- Include iterative feedback cycles for ongoing student navigation of learning.

Example:
In a literature course, instead of one standardized essay, students might:

- Curate a podcast episode analyzing a text through a cultural or personal lens.
- Record a bilingual oral storytelling performance.
- Create a visual map of central themes tied to personal experience.

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Closing Reflection

At its core, this approach reframes learning as collective sense-making rooted in justice, inclusivity, and imagination. UDL provides the flexible infrastructure, CR-SE ensures that pedagogy is culturally sustaining and equity-driven, and autohistoria-teoría reminds us that students' own narratives and lived realities constitute a foundational body of knowledge.

The courageous classroom is not bound to static methods or rigid assessments but thrives in fluidity, multiplicity, and ongoing dialogue, shaping education as a space where all learners are seen, heard, and empowered.

Expanded References

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Sample Assignment: *Narrative as Theory — Autohistoria Project*

Overview

In this assignment, students engage in autohistoria-teoría by narrating and theorizing from their lived experiences in dialogue with course concepts. Students choose the format that best reflects their learning style (essay, podcast, digital zine, performance, visual art, etc.). The assignment draws on UDL principles of flexibility and emphasizes CR-SE by centering culture, identity, and community as valid sources of knowledge.

Learning Goals

- Connect course concepts to students' cultural, social, and lived experiences.
- Demonstrate understanding through multiple modalities of expression.
- Practice reflection and theorizing as ways of building knowledge.
- Recognize diversity of interpretation and representation within learning communities.

Assignment Directions (to be student-facing)

1. Choose a Story / Experience:
   Identify a personal experience, family story, or community event that connects to one of the course themes. This could be joyful, painful, complex, or transformative.
2. Theorize from the Story:
   Explain what this experience *teaches us* about the theme.
   a. What larger ideas or lessons emerge?
   b. How might your story be in conversation with existing scholarship, community histories, or cultural frameworks?
3. Create a Project in Your Preferred Format:
   You may respond in any of the following formats (or propose your own idea):
   a. Traditional academic essay (4–5 double-spaced pages)
   b. Personal narrative with integrated scholarly references
   c. Podcast or audio story (5–7 minutes)
   d. Digital zine, comic, or illustrated narrative
   e. Short video (3–5 minutes)
   f. Performance piece, poetry, or spoken word
   g. Visual artwork accompanied by a brief artist statement

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4. Reflect in Writing (1 page):
   Regardless of your format, submit a short reflection that outlines:
   a. Why you chose your medium
   b. Challenges you faced
   c. What you learned about yourself and about the theme

Example Scaffolding (Unit Plan)

Week 1–2: Readings on CR-SE and UDL principles + class discussion on "knowledge as lived experience."
Week 3: Short workshop on storytelling methods (oral, written, visual, digital).
Week 4: Draft sharing in small groups—peer and instructor feedback.
Week 5: Finalized autohistoria project presented in class or uploaded to LMS portfolio.

UDL Features Embedded

- Multiple Means of Expression: Choice of output format ensures accessibility & honors learner modalities.
- Multiple Means of Engagement: Students select culturally relevant and personally meaningful topics.
- Multiple Means of Representation: Encourages integration of images, symbols, language, and multimodal design.
- Scaffolding: Draft feedback cycles, writing & tech workshops, optional templates.
- Assistive Tools: Students may use AI for brainstorming/storyboarding, translation apps for multilingual narratives, accessibility software for multimedia creation.

Reflection Prompts for Students (Meta-Cognition)

- How does your lived experience produce knowledge?
- In what ways does your chosen modality reflect how you best learn and share ideas?
- What did you learn about your cultural and intellectual identities through this work?
- How do you see yourself as a co-contributor to classroom knowledge?

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Why Does this Assignment Work?

- UDL-Aligned: Provides choice, flexibility, scaffolding, and multiple entry points.
- CR-SE Aligned: Values students' lived experiences and cultural knowledge as assets.
- Autohistoria-Theoría Aligned: Treats narrative and self-reflection not as peripheral but as legitimate sources of theory and scholarship.
- Brave Space Pedagogy: Builds trust by affirming voice, vulnerability, and creative risk-taking.

Assessment (Flexible Rubric)

Criteria:

1. Connection to Course Themes (30%) – Depth of analysis, ability to tie personal narrative to big ideas.
2. Creativity & Choice of Format (20%) – Appropriateness and intentionality of chosen modality.
3. Reflection & Theorizing (30%) – Demonstrates insight, critical curiosity, and self-inquiry.
4. Accessibility & Effort (20%) – Clear communication for diverse audiences; evidence of thoughtful engagement with process.

Assessment is growth-oriented: revision opportunities are available after feedback.

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Scenario: Cumulative Exam in Social Studies

Before the Test:

- Distributed study guide includes a blend of text, visuals, and audio summaries.
- Practice test contains options: for one essay question, students can either write, record an audio response, or present a storyboard.
- Teacher explicitly models "thinking aloud" through a multiple-choice question, explaining reasoning, and encourages students to create their own class practice questions based on family or community narratives.

During the Test:

- Main test: Multiple short-answer questions, with students allowed to hand-write or type. For the essay, students can respond in English or a home language plus English.
- Several questions connect historical content to community or personal experience.
- Extra time is available for all; some students choose to take the test in a quiet room.

After the Test:

- Students submit a brief reflection on what testing procedures felt empowering or challenging.
- Teacher reviews feedback for future test-design adjustments.

Key Takeaway

UDL and culturally sustaining, reflective pedagogies can make test-taking a more equitable, meaningful, and learner-centered experience without compromising academic rigor—shifting the focus from rote performance to genuine demonstration of learning and identity.

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<p align="center">Research Project Handout: Your Story in Dialogue with Scholarship</p>

Welcome! In this research project, you'll combine your own experiences, community stories, and scholarly research to create a project that matters to you. You'll have a choice of format and support each step along the way. Scholarship is not just about "academic experts"—it's also a place where our lived realities, families, cultures, and communities can be sources of knowledge and theory.

What is this project?

- You will choose a research question that connects something from your life, community, or culture with our course topics.
- You will use both scholarly sources and your own experience (story, memory, reflection) to explore the question.
- You will choose how you present your findings—as a traditional paper, podcast, video, performance, zine, website, or another format, as long as it meets academic standards.

Project Steps & Timeline

1. Topic Proposal (Due: _____)
   a. Briefly describe your chosen research topic or question.
   b. Explain how it connects to your lived experience, family, or community.
2. Research Journal/Story Log (Due: _____)
   a. Keep notes on your research *and* any relevant personal experiences, memories, or community stories you plan to include.
3. Annotated Bibliography (Due: _____)
   a. List at least X scholarly sources with 1–2 sentences each about how they relate to your topic.
4. Draft/Project Check-In (Due: _____)
   a. Bring a rough draft, script, storyboard, or demo to class for peer and instructor feedback.
5. Final Submission & Reflective Commentary (Due: _____)
   a. Turn in your completed project in the format of your choice.
   b. Include a 1–2 page reflection explaining your choices (format, process, challenges, and what you learned about your topic and yourself).

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Format Choices

- Paper: Narrative + analysis (4–6 pages)
- Podcast: Script or audio (5–8 minutes, with transcript)
- Zine or Comic: 8–12 pages or panels, combining text and images
- Video or Performance: 5–8 minutes, with creator's notes
- Other? Propose your idea!

No matter which you pick, all projects must use academic sources and connect your story to course themes.

Example of UDL for Research Paper Assignment

UDL Feature	Traditional Paper	UDL-Enriched Research Paper
Format Options	Research essay	Essay, video, podcast, presentation
Topic Choice	Instructor-assigned	Student-selected within objectives
Feedback Cycle	Final paper only	Drafts, feedback, revision permitted
Support	Rubric, example paper	Rubric, examples, scaffolding, edits
Submission Flexibility	Single deadline	Multiple submission options