# Universal Design for Learning: The Intersection of Inclusive Education & ~~Empathy~~ Compassion in Social Foundations of Education

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**Abstract:** We explore intersections of Universal Design for Learning and Social Foundations of Education, arguing that integrating Universal Design for Learning into foundational coursework not only enhances access and engagement for diverse learners but also deepens pre-service teachers' understanding of justice- and action-oriented pedagogies. By situating Universal Design for Learning within the broader discourse of equity and critical education, we contribute to a more expansive and reflexive vision of teacher preparation. We argue that these efforts contribute to a pedagogy of compassion that humanizes and emboldens teaching and learning.

> The world is before you and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in.
> — James Baldwin (1988, 221): A precept of teacher education programs at Queens College.

We explore the utilization of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in the Social Foundations of Education (SFE) classroom by unpacking the revision of an undergraduate assignment concerning public school funding. Utilized within a Social Foundations course as part of a teacher education program, the assignment's revision aimed to enable students to integrate insights from various course activities by fostering active and critical engagement with real-world policies. Through an analysis of student work samples and a comparison between the original and revised assignments, we argue that incorporating UDL in the SFE context enhanced students' development of compassion, critical consciousness, agency, and advocacy skill. Our analysis suggests ways in which integrating UDL into SFE can enable students to personally connect to sociopolitical concepts, develop empathy for individuals and communities, consider not only themselves but also their future students, and develop "real life" awareness of political/ideological influences on schooling. UDL offers a framework for building inclusive and equitable education environments which suggests that it comfortably resides in SFE. However, UDL remains underexplored within the field of SFE.[1] At its core, UDL frameworks are meant to address numerous barriers to learning. At the same time, SFE, a field concerned with historical, philosophical, and sociocultural dimensions of schooling, provides a critical lens through which to explore how various obstructions come to bear on teaching and learning in specific contexts.

## Who We Are: The Authors and Our Students

We (Mary and Leslee) were trained as researchers in doctoral programs focused on Social Foundations of Education. Both of us teach undergraduate and graduate Social Foundations courses in teacher education programs at Queens College, City University of New York. Mary 25 years of experience in elementary education and Leslee 15 years in secondary education. Our positioning in teacher education profoundly informs and influences our work in SFE.

[1] The lack of SFE engagement with UDL can be seen in the flagship journals of *Educational Studies* and *Educational Foundations*, neither of which, in their respective 50-year and 30-year histories, have published any manuscripts that refer to UDL.

Students at Queens College are remarkable: 48% are first-generation college students, 33% are immigrants, and another third are children of immigrants. Half receive Pell Grants, reflecting significant economic need. A substantial number of students are recipients of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) grants.[2] Recent political developments have heightened anxiety among our students regarding immigration status and eligibility for diminishing funding opportunities. In spring 2025, public discourse surrounding such issues as immigration, foreign policy, educational funding, and the politicization of curricula culminated in a discourse of concern that permeated our classroom discussions, and our students were acutely attuned to how educational policies were directly impacting their lives and futures. Being personally affected by a plague of executive orders underscored in "real time" the urgency of addressing social and political dimensions of teaching and learning. The overall climate of crisis and uncertainty may have heightened students' interest in questions of equity, power, civic responsibility, and the structural forces that shape education.

## Compassion as a Framework for Pedagogy

The original title of this paper focused on empathy and the Social Foundations of Education. However, as we delved deeper into our inquiry, we realized that *compassion* — which Megan Laverty (2025) reminds us is a critical virtue — more accurately captures our focus. As critical teacher educators committed to cultivating greater compassion in our practice, we strive to continually reflect on how to best teach social foundations within this context. Compassion informs both our goals and methods. We share Laverty's concern that liberal education is under threat, especially in teacher education programs, which are becoming increasingly technocratic and less focused on the liberal arts. Furthermore, in approaching our pedagogy, we recognize that traditional higher education practices — lecturing at students, treating them as passive recipients of knowledge — tend to dehumanize our students *and* us. Drawing inspiration from John Dewey's (1907) vision of creating the world we want to live in through our classrooms, we seek to engage students with compassion. We are further inspired by environmental science researchers (Engle et al., 2024) who define compassionate pedagogy as combining cognitive kindness with a commitment to fostering critical, complex understandings of social and ecological justice. We focus on *compassion* and not *empathy* or *caring* because compassion is active, involving not only understanding another's situation but also the desire to respond in helpful ways (Goetz, et al., 2010; Killingback et al., 2024). UDL guidelines have helped us take action to put a compassionate approach to pedagogy into practice.

## Universal Design for Learning

UDL guidelines are a continuously refined tool designed to provide educators with "a set of concrete suggestions that can be applied to any discipline or domain to ensure that all learners can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities" (CAST - Center for Applied Special Technology, 2024). During the 2024-2025 academic year, CUNY (City University of New York) sponsored a professional development course on UDL. Participants included faculty from a wide range of disciplines across CUNY's multi-campus urban university. Both of us joined the course and quickly decided to introduce some UDL principles into Spring 2025 classes. We were interested in learning about UDL through the active use of its principles in our teaching. The UDL framework is intended to meet students where they are and focus not

[2] https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/qc.oie/viz/1_CollegeProfile-EnrolledStudents/EnrolledStdntProfile

only on course content but also pedagogy. Because our students are future teachers, we hope they will carry an ethos of compassionate teaching and learning into their own classrooms. We found UDL to offer a vocabulary for discussing and shaping our efforts to teach "better," which for us means grounding our practice in compassion.

The thirty-six UDL guidelines are laid out in a nine-block grid organized by engagement, representation, and action/expression, with access, support, and executive function as additional categories.[3] Although originating in special education, UDL guidelines are broadly applicable to all teaching and learning contexts. As guidelines, these concepts are intended to inform teacher practice but not to direct that practice. Being teacher educators, we are compelled to ask, "What do these guidelines look like in practice?" To illustrate part of our inquiry, we share the experience of revising one assignment in an undergraduate Social Foundations course. We draw on seven guidelines we found most relevant to pedagogical work in Social Foundations in teacher education:

Design Options for Welcoming Interests and Identities (7)
- Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity (Guideline 7.2)

Design Options for Sustaining Effort and Persistence (8)
- Foster belonging and community (8.4)

Design Options for Emotional Capacity (9)
- Develop awareness of self and others (9.2)
- Cultivate empathy and restorative practices (9.4)

Design Options for Building Knowledge (3)
- Connecting prior knowledge to new learning (3.1)
- Highlight and explore patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships (3.2)
- Cultivate multiple ways of knowing and making meaning (3.3)

## Compassion into Practice: A First Step

For a few years in her undergraduate Social Foundations courses, Mary had assigned written weekly reading responses. The objectives of these assignments were to: a) check that students had completed the assigned readings; and b) provide a mechanism for students to think through the readings and be prepared for class discussion. The assignment under consideration here was a two-page analytical response to readings about school funding. Students were provided the following instructions:

> Write a two-page analytical response to Skinner (2019) and NPR (2016). To receive full credit, your response must include the following elements:
>
> 1. *In your own words*, describe a theme you identified in the readings as a group.
>
> 2. Answer one or more of the questions posed on the syllabus using evidence from each text (including media) to support your argument: How are schools funded? How *should* schools be funded? Does investment in childhood education matter? What are the real costs of schooling and a lack of schooling?
>
> 3. Pose a carefully considered question (or questions) about the readings.

[3] https://udlguidelines.cast.org/static/udlg3-graphicorganizer-digital-numbers-a11y.pdf

The following is an excerpt of a characteristic student response (2024): "Investments in childhood education, matters more than what is spoken about. People only seem to believe that whatever we have we have and no extra time or money can influence a child to learn. Children can only learn what they are given, and if the parents and teachers are barely given resources how can we expect children to succeed? Children need multiple opportunities and challenges so they can learn and be the best they can be." This student's writing is typical of other submissions from the same class. It fully meets the assignment requirements, but goes no further. Although the topic is highly relevant to these students' lived experiences, the writing exhibits minimal personal engagement. Impersonal, procedural writing, such as "how can we,,,?," demonstrates some distance between the writer and the content. The language used is abstract: "People only seem…" and "Children need multiple opportunities…," without specificity or illustrative details to support the argument. The format of the weekly responses remained consistent for each iteration, with only the reading content differing from one assignment to the next. Each week, students identified a theme in the collection of assigned readings, answered one or more questions, and posed a new question about the readings. Maintaining a consistent format enabled students to develop some fluency with a specific style of writing. However, in end-of-semester course evaluations, some students stated they found the consistent format of the weekly responses to be tedious. It was, in short, a bit boring for them. Additionally, from the professor's point of view, the assignments were tedious to grade: each weekly response closely resembled the others.

Over the years as colleagues in teacher education, we have become each other's sounding boards, regularly exchanging ideas and insights that shape both our research and our teaching. During one conversation in fall semester 2024, we discussed our concerns about the tedium we had witnessed in students — and had felt ourselves — after assigning consistently structured writing prompts. Unaware of UDL frameworks at the time, Leslee shared that she had been offering students format options for demonstrating their knowledge of educational policies as part of a culminating assignment. Recording a podcast, composing and annotating a poem or song, creating a newsletter, and writing a letter to an elected official were among the ideas she presented to her students. The last choice — letter to an elected official — captured Mary's attention.

The following semester, spring 2025, Mary utilized Leslee's recommendations and UDL concepts to redesign the weekly reading response assignments, aiming to increase students' engagement with the content. This is a writing-intensive course, and students are expected to develop their writing skill. However, instead of a standard structure each week, this semester's students completed a different style of writing each week to demonstrate their understanding of assigned readings and prepare for class discussion. The varied styles of writing included revising a standardized test question, a transcribed audio recording of a conversation with a friend, and a mind map. For the revised assignment we are examining here, students were asked to compose a letter to an elected official advocating for a specific policy change. Referring to the same readings on school funding used in the assignment in previous semesters discussed above, Mary asked students to:

> Identify an elected official at the local, state, or federal level.
>
> Write a 1-2-page letter to that official expressing your thoughts about how schools are funded and asking the official to do something.

Be certain to use information from the assigned readings by Skinner (2019) and NPR (2016) to support your argument.

Here are four characteristic responses to the revised, i.e., "new" assignment.

**Response A**: I believe that these injustices need to be handled with *urgency* because every child, every student deserves access to *exceptional* education. I await your support for these policies, addressing the proper funding among districts so that every child and every school regardless of location or status of tax base receives the resources it needs to be successful. Lastly *I cannot stress this enough* that it is important to invest in public education so that all students regardless of circumstances or background be given a chance to *flourish*. (emphasis added)

**Response B**:The town over from me, Amityville, is a *struggling* town that is only a five-minute drive from my house. *Sadly*, their school district has always had problems due to a lack of funding. *How is it possible* that a town that is a mile from where I live and went to school experiences significantly more of a *struggle* than Massapequa does? In an article from NPR, "Why America's Schools Have A Money Problem," I was able to gather a relative understanding of the issues. (emphasis added)

**Response C**: I am writing this letter to explain my *concerns regarding your proposal to dismantle the United States Department of Education*. Such actions would have grave consequences for students across the country, from preschoolers and all the way up to college students. I use federal loans to attend college and work as a paraprofessional in the New York City Department of Education. *I am concerned for my job security* and my goal is to become a teacher that requires a college education. After reading Rebecca R. Skinner's report titled State and Local Financing of Public Schools, listening to NPR's School Money series *and a recent Barrons article*, it became clear to me that reducing federal funding for education would negatively impact millions of students nationwide, especially those that are in districts that already have low funding due to socioeconomic factors and students with disabilities. (emphasis added)

**Response D**: Since New York City is one of the most *economically diverse yet deeply unequal* cities, it is crucial to implement [...] measures to guarantee that every student has access to the resources they need to succeed. For this reason, *I urge you to advocate* for a more progressive funding model — one that prioritizes equity, reduces reliance on local property taxes, and ensures that every dollar directly benefits all students. *The future of our community* depends on education, and no child should be denied opportunities simply *because of where they live*. (emphasis added)

Given a prompt that asked students to direct their writing to a specific person, students wrote strikingly different responses than those they wrote in the earlier assignment when addressing only the assigned readings in their responses. Students' writing became more passionate, urgent, and precise. Although they were not instructed to do so, every student wrote in the first-person singular, using phrases such as "I believe that…" and "I am concerned." Students identified community-specific issues, such as "reliance on local property taxes" and "reducing federal funding," and referenced real places from their own experiences, including New York City, Amityville, and Massapequa. Instead of merely describing the inequities they discovered, students conveyed a sense of urgency and called for meaningful action to improve conditions in real communities. Words such as "Sadly" and questions pointing out problematic circumstances

— "How is it possible…?" — conveyed the students' compassion for members of those communities. Some students incorporated outside research unprompted, such as citing a *Barron's* article. Overall, their work showed a greater sense of purpose in writing and expressed direct engagement with the topic of school funding. We speculate that a few key features of the revised assignment contributed to students' increased engagement, as evidenced in their writing. First, the writing was in the form of a letter, which suggests, but does not require, students to write in the first person. Second, the writing assignment directed students to ask the recipient of the letter to "do something," directing author attention to action and the possibility of change.

## Implications and Next Steps

Posey helps us speculate how the revised assignment generates new, more meaningful responses that are grounded in students' past experiences. Their emotional connections to the assignment are activated and their personal experiences deepen their engagement with the topic. The revised assignment served as both a pedagogical tool and a civic engagement tool, aligning with two UDL gudielines. First, the new assignment provided a vehicle for students to "Connect prior knowledge to new learning" (CAST, 2024, Guideline 3.1) as seen when they connect larger concepts of school funding with their own localized knowledge of school: "a town that is a mile from where I live and went to school experiences significantly more of a struggle than Massapequa does." In addition, students' responses to the revised assignment also demonstrate possibilities to "Cultivate empathy and restorative practices" (CAST, 2024, Guideline 9.4) when they moved from writing impersonal accounts of school funding to utilizing emotionally laden language such as "Sadly," "I am concerned," and "I cannot stress this enough." In so doing, the abstract accounts of school funding became personal stories that "paint emotional scenes" (Posey, 2019, 103). Emotional engagement with the topic, Posey argues, can potentially enhance students' learning of critical topics, such as the inequities in school funding.

Without being explicitly prompted to do so, students connected Social Foundations content to their prior knowledge and lived experiences. Their work reflected both empathy for others and a strong commitment to taking meaningful action — in essence, they demonstrated compassion. Confronted with the reality of economic disparities, students responded not just with understanding but with *compassionate action*, turning empathy into a purposeful response. By advocating for specific actions, they positioned themselves not only as learners but also as knowledge producers and engaged public actors who advocate for change. These qualities employ scholarship that examines technocratization of teacher education (Aydarova, 2021) and embody the "commitments" outlined by Social Foundations scholars for their field of study, especially the commitment to "Engaging students in learning experiences that develop the critical and analytical capacities needed to advocate for more meaningful educational experiences by: a. developing curriculum and implement approaches to instruction that facilitate students' capabilities to think critically and analytically about their education and education in general; and b. providing learning opportunities that enhance students' development of a sense of agency" (Committee, 2013, 118).

Posey (2019, 162) explains that UDL "puts the burden of change on the design of the learning environment," inspiring our ongoing learning about UDL and its potential to enhance the classroom environment for Social Foundations in teacher education. We appreciate Posey's use of the word "burden" as it makes clear the responsibility of the instructor to construct a learning environment that actively supports student learning. We note the contrast of this

approach to a traditional higher education stance of treating the classroom as a sorting machine in which some students are expected to fail. Many tenets of UDL align conceptually with Social Foundation's emphasis on asset-based thinking (CAST, 2024; Posey, 2019), as well as equity and justice. For educators, UDL provides tools to create inclusive and compassionate learning environments that support students' social/emotional development. By tapping into the strengths and lived experiences of our students, UDL frameworks may also support culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies (Kieran & Anderson, 2019; Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016).

In this project, we find that UDL supports a pedagogy of compassion that is at the heart of Social Foundations of Education within teacher education. Compassionate pedagogy, we argue, is not a temporary response to periods of sociopolitical upheaval; it is an everyday practice that must be embedded into the fabric of teaching and learning to confront ongoing injustices and foster meaningful, lasting change. As we look ahead toward future inquiry, we aim to explore how UDL is and can be situated in SFE, with particular attention to its connections with equity, social justice, and culturally responsive pedagogy. This includes critically examining our own teaching practices and identifying opportunities beyond this one assignment to integrate UDL and compassionate teaching and learning more intentionally. Through continued reflection and application, we aim to clarify, theorize, and put into practice the aspects of UDL that concretize the ideas underpinning compassionate pedagogy.

We intentionally align our pedagogy with the ideals first expressed by philosopher Mark Edmundson (2004, 56) and later adapted by Liston, Whitcomb, and Borko (2009, 110): "Can you live it? Can you put it into action? Can you speak — or adapt — the language of this work to live [and teach] better?" That is precisely what we are striving for: to center compassionate pedagogy as a serious intellectual project. To that end, we join scholars such as Zembylas (2013, 506) in promoting "critical pedagogies of compassion" as counter-pedagogies against increasingly dehumanized education. As our work is situated in teacher education, our students are either preparing to become teachers or are early in their teaching careers. This context makes SFE especially urgent, as our students are learning to shape their own classrooms. Educators need frameworks for understanding the broader social and political forces that impact schooling. Pedagogies of compassion offer a means to resist dehumanization and help teachers prioritize humanity, equity, and care in their teaching practices. By cultivating such approaches now, we hope to equip our students to teach with consciously compassionate action.

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