The Intersection of Standards Based Grading and Universal Design for Learning in a Sixth Grade Language Arts Classroom

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Abstract

A sixth-grade English Language Arts teacher at a K–12 developmental research school conducted action research examining the experiences of students in her class related to her application of Standards Based Grading (SBG) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). She conducted anonymous surveys and analyzed how course grades compared with results on the Florida Standards Assessment (FSA). The students offered insights into their experiences and suggestions for future curriculum design regarding SBG and UDL strategies. For 80% of the 110 students, class grades aligned with FSA scores. The teacher will continue to employ SBG and UDL in the future.

Keywords: Standards Based Grading, Universal Design for Learning, Middle School, Language Arts, Action Research

Background and Purpose

During the 2017–2018 school year, I moved to a new position after teaching elementary classes for twenty years. I was thrilled to begin my work as a sixth-grade language arts instructor at Ludum Developmental Research School in North Central Florida. Ludum is a K–12 public school associated with a nearby state university. Our student population is controlled by lottery to reflect Florida's racial, gender, economic, and ability makeup. The students live in more than 30 small and rural north Florida cities and towns surrounding the university. My classes reflected this diversity, as they do every year. I taught all 110 of the sixth grade students in five different classes.

I had been teaching third grade at Ludum for four years and had been introduced to the concepts of Standards Based Grading (SBG) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) through my work at Ludum. As I worked through the summer to design my sixth-grade language arts program, I wanted to use both SBG and a UDL framework to support students to have success. I was lucky to know over half of the incoming students because I had worked with them when they were in third grade. I was familiar with some of their profiles and knew that, like every year, I would be working with a wide range of students with diverse needs and interests. Additionally, the entire sixth-grade team of teachers was piloting SBG, transitioning from a traditional grading system.

Regarding SBG, the elementary level classes had been using SBG report cards for a few years and the sixth-grade team received much support and professional development around it at the beginning of the school year. I understood that SBG practices focus on what students know and can do rather than how they behave and other non-achievement measures (Heflebower, Hoegh, & Warrick, 2014). The sixth grade team of teachers transitioned from traditional grades to new categories; for example, "Expert" became our new "A" and "Proficient" became our new "B." We wanted to encourage students and families to focus on standards and how students

demonstrated mastery of them. We also eliminated any graded value for behaviors such as turning in homework or behavior in class. I was excited to create a classroom culture that would focus on individual students and what they could demonstrate regarding mastery of the standards. I was also interested in the student metacognition and motivation which could be increased by the use of SBG. O'Connor (2009) suggests "motivation is enhanced when students are provided accurate information about achievement, have clear learning goals, and study in an environment that supports learning by not including diagnostic and formative assessment in grades and by being positive and supportive, not negative or punitive" (p.6). If my curriculum design could increase motivation in my students it would be worth the effort to build it carefully.

Each sixth-grade teacher worked this year within an SBG model, which was communicated to students and families through assignment grades, progress reports, and report cards. Our grading system, Skyward, reported four levels of mastery: Expert, Proficient, Approaching Proficiency, and Not Meeting, rather than A, B, C, or D/F. I was concerned about how my grades would align with standardized testing results, such as the Florida Standards Assessment (FSA), in this new model for grading. I understood the importance of my curriculum and grading aligning with the standards (Pollio & Hochbein, 2015). I worked to incorporate these levels into all grading instruments, such as rubrics for each assignment, and discussions with students and families. With this in mind, I continued to build my program for the year, developing units, assessments, and rubrics.

Regarding the incorporation of UDL in my work, I was fortunate enough to attend two professional development opportunities about UDL in the months before beginning my new teaching position. I completed an online course through Harvard University titled "Ensuring Success for All." Additionally, I attended a week-long face-to-face professional development course at Ludum about UDL which was delivered by my colleague, who is also a middle school language arts instructor at Ludum. These two experiences gave me a foundational understanding of the UDL framework to apply to my program.

I learned that UDL was established over 30 years ago by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) when neuropsychologists, professors, and K–12 educators worked together to redesign education for students who had previously experienced barriers in public education settings. "UDL is a framework that guides the shift from designing learning environments and lessons with potential barriers to designing barrier-free, instructionally rich learning environments and lessons that provide access to all students" (Nelson, 2014, p. 2). I came to understand the UDL framework is organized into three principles: engagement, representation, and action and expression. It is important for a teacher to consider these and the unique needs of each student (i.e., learner variability) when planning lessons and assessments.

In addition to SBG and UDL, I also was provided a reading and writing curriculum published by Center for the Collaborative Classroom (CCC). The reading curriculum, "Making Meaning," and the writing curriculum, "Being a Writer," were familiar to me because I had delivered the third-grade versions for the previous four years. I modified the curriculum for time constraints and also to provide these SBG and UDL supports for students. (See Appendix A for a detailed explanation of how the aspects of SBG, UDL, and CCC influenced the program I designed for my sixth-grade ELA program.)
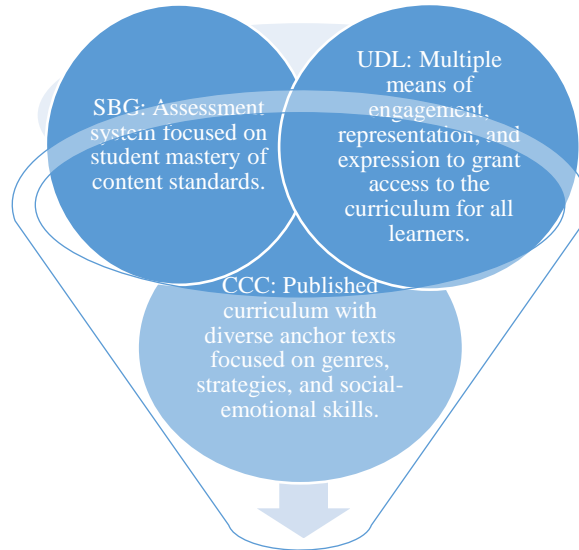
My ELA Program Design

Figure 1. Concept map of program design.

As I began to build my program, I wondered how SBG and UDL would affect my students. In what ways would students be supported by a Universally designed core with SBG? Which teaching techniques would make them feel most supported? How would the grades they earned in my class correlate with the high-stakes test score they received on the state mandated Florida Standards Assessment at the end of the year, especially students who I identified as historically struggling in language arts? With these questions in mind, I decided to engage in action research to collect and analyze data in order to learn from my students about their experiences in my class.

Method

In order to understand how students experienced SBG and UDL in my class, I engaged in the following activities:

- designed instruction based on the principles of UDL; for example, Table 1 includes the lesson plans for a mini-unit at the beginning of the year;
- designed SBG rubrics to drive how students understood the assignments and standards; for example, Figure 5 illustrates the assignment and rubric for the mini-unit described in Table 1;
- used the rubrics throughout units of study for students and teachers to evaluate student work toward goals;
- anonymously surveyed all of my students after the completion of the first mini-unit to learn how they perceived the UDL and SBG supports offered throughout the unit (see survey in Appendix B);
- selected four students whom I identified to have historically struggled in language arts as determined by grades, FSA scores, or IEP designation, to look closely at how they performed in my class and on the FSA;
- collected grades as a source of data on all of my students;
- collected FSA scores as a source of data on all of my students.

Table 1. *Daily Lesson Plans for Mini-Unit*

| Day	Mini-Lesson (15 minutes) and Workshop (30 minutes)
1	Mini-Lesson: Read aloud *Why Do Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*; introduce definition of folktale; use turn and talk for partners to discuss characters, setting, problem, and solution Workshop: students read folktales and fables independently
2	Mini-Lesson: Read aloud *Feathers and Fools*; introduce definition of fable; use turn and talk for partners to discuss characters, setting, problem, and solution Workshop: students read folktales and fables independently
3	Mini-Lesson: Whole class collaboration to build Venn diagram comparing and contrasting the two stories; partners add and explain one statement to chart (see Figure 2) Workshop: students read folktales and fables independently
4	Mini-Lesson: Read and discuss the rubric which describes the assignment and the tools available; show the cloze paragraph support as an option if students need that support (see Figure 3) Workshop: students begin assignment either on paper or in a Google Doc
5	Mini-Lesson: Read and discuss my example comparing and contrasting baseball and basketball (see Figure 4), students discuss with partners what grades the assignments would earn with the rubric Workshop: students work to complete assignment
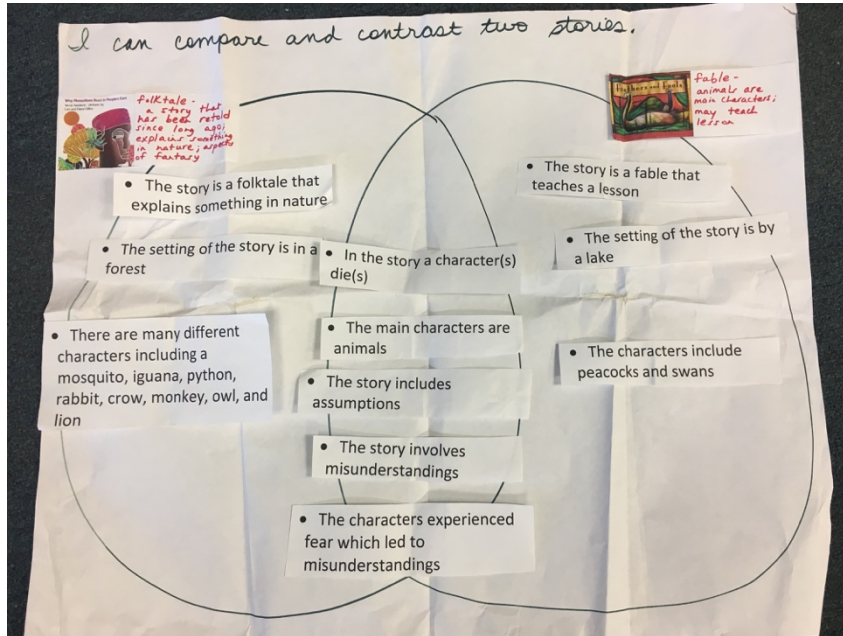
Figure 2. Photograph of Venn diagram from whole class sort.

A compare and contrast paragraph might look like...

The two stories <u>Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears</u> and <u>Feathers and Fools</u> are alike in some ways. For example, _____ _____. In addition, _____. The two stories are also different in some ways. For example, _____ _____. Also, _____. <u>Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears</u> and <u>Feathers and Fools</u> are both enjoyable stories that people will enjoy for their entertaining plots and beautiful illustrations.

Figure 3. Cloze paragraph to support students' writing.

I have been learning about two sports in my P.E. class and I've noticed that baseball and basketball are alike in some ways. For example, both baseball and basketball use one ball during a game. In addition, teams with several players play against each other in both baseball and basketball. The two sports are also different in some ways. For example, the way to score in each sport is different. Also, there are different numbers of players on teams in the two sports. Both baseball and basketball are fun to play and watch.

I have been learning about two sports in my P.E. class and I've noticed that baseball and basketball are alike in some ways. For example, both baseball and basketball use one ball during a game. In baseball you use a small, white, hard baseball which the pitcher pitches, the batter hits, and other players catch and throw. In basketball, you use a large, orange, bouncy ball which players dribble, pass, and shoot into a basket. In addition, teams with several players play against each other in both baseball and basketball. In baseball the teams take turns being in the field and being up to bat. In basketball the teams quickly change from offense when they are trying to score a basket to defense when they are trying to stop the other team from scoring a basket. The two sports are also different in some ways. For example, the way to score in each sport is different. In baseball the way to score one point is to hit the ball and run around to all four bases. In basketball you score one, two, or three points when you shoot the ball through the basket. Also, you play the two sports in different types of places. You play baseball on a baseball field which is always outside and has grass and dirt. You play basketball either inside or outside on a basketball court which is either concrete or wooden floor and much smaller than a baseball field. Both baseball and basketball are fun to play and watch.

Figure 4. Example compare and contrast paragraphs for students to grade with rubric.

Compare and Contrast Paragraph

1. After reading and discussing Why Do Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears and Feathers and Fools, write one paragraph that compares and contrasts the two stories.

2. You can use these resources to help you: audio recordings of books on Canvas, Venn diagram in classroom with notes about the stories, example paragraph template, this rubric, friends, and Mrs. Beckett

3. Projects due:_____

	4 - Mastery	3 – Proficient	2 - Approaching	1 – Beginning
Compare and Contrast Paragraph	I wrote a paragraph with an introduction sentence, several sentences that clearly explain at least two ways the texts are similar, several sentences that clearly explain at least two ways the texts are different, and a conclusion sentence.	I wrote a paragraph that includes at least two ways the texts are similar and at least two ways the texts are different. The paragraph has an introduction and a conclusion sentence.	I wrote a group of sentences that begin to explain how the texts are similar or different.	I wrote a few sentences that do not yet explain how the texts are similar or different.

Figure 5. Assignment description and rubric.

Data Analysis and Findings

After completing our first mini-unit described above, I administered the survey to all five of my classes. I had a return rate of 109 out of 110 surveys for a good representation of my students. I explained to each class that I was interested in how my teaching choices had supported them and that their responses would be anonymous so they could be completely honest. I read the items of the survey to each class. Throughout the school year I collected final grades for my students and finally in July, I received my students' FSA ELA scores to compare to my course grades. These three sources of data helped me learn about my research questions.

How Did SBG and UDL Support My Students?

My first research question focused on which teaching techniques, informed by my SBG and UDL focus, would help my students feel most supported. When students ranked techniques on the survey, as shown in Table 2, time in class, options to complete the assignment, and my example paragraph were most helpful.

Table 2. *Student Survey Responses Evaluating SBG and UDL Teaching Techniques in Mini-unit*

Technique	Really not helpful	Not helpful	Neither	Helpful	Very helpful
Read aloud and class discussion	3	1	12	39	54
Graphic organizer for class discussion	2	4	23	35	44
Rubric	1	4	26	42	36
Example paragraph	4	2	17	25	60
Time in class	0	1	5	30	72
Options to complete assignment	0	1	11	32	65

When students were asked, in a short response format, which of the six techniques was most helpful and why, I learned the following:

- Twenty-one students reported the read aloud and class discussion were most helpful for reasons such as hearing others' ideas and understanding the books well.
- Nine students reported the graphic organizer was most helpful for reasons such as it gave examples and ideas for the assignment.
- Four students reported the rubric was most helpful for reasons such as it gave ideas for what needed to be included.
- Thirty-three students reported the example paragraph was most helpful for reasons such as it helped them get started and know how to word their answers.
- Twenty-eight students reported the time in class was most helpful for reasons such as they did not want any more homework.
- Six students reported the options to complete the assignment were most helpful for reasons such as typing helped them with the writing.

Then, students were asked, in a short response format, if I had done anything else other than the six techniques listed that had helped them. The most common responses were:

- Thirty-two students wrote that conferences with me or my feedback on their work was also helpful.
- Ten students wrote that being able to resubmit the assignment with corrections for a better grade was also helpful.

The last question on the survey asked students, in a short response format, if I should do anything differently next year. Most students responded that I should "do the same thing." However, there were also two suggestions that were insightful:

- Put a copy of the book online for students to access at home and to be able to reread on their own while working on the assignment to help remember the stories.
- Do not use an example paragraph because it is "pretty much telling people the answer."

I wanted to understand in what ways SBG and UDL supported my students. I learned that students reported benefitting from all of my UDL supports, including two I had not realized I was providing: conferencing with me and the opportunity to resubmit assignments with improvements. While some techniques were more popular than others, I do not believe I will eliminate any in the future because some students benefitted from each of them. My students also gave me wonderful suggestions for improvements, which I plan to implement in the future, such as putting a copy of the texts online to help students access them from home and to revisit them to help them remember the details.

I find it interesting that the use of a rubric was not rated more helpful by my students, and it makes me think I need to spend more time teaching students how to use the rubric and perhaps building rubrics with my students. Or perhaps rubrics are important, but only as an SBG tool, not as a part of the UDL framework of support. I would like to further explore the role of rubrics in student learning and goal setting.

How Did My Course Grades Correlate with the High-Stakes State Assessment?

My next research question focused on how the grades students received in my class with my SBG design and UDL framework correlated with the state test results. The state of Florida assigns a score from 1–5 to each student which combines their performance on a writing test and a separate reading test. The levels are described as follows:

1 – Inadequate, highly likely to need substantial support for the next grade

2 – Below satisfactory, likely to need substantial support for next grade

3 – Satisfactory, may need additional support for the next grade

4 – Proficient, likely to excel in the next grade

5 – Mastery, highly likely to excel in the next grade

As described earlier, grades in the sixth-grade SBG structure were reported in the following levels: Not Meeting, Approaching, Proficient, and Expert. In my grade reporting, I entered grades for assignments, however one assignment could generate up to seven separate grades. I had reading assignments, writing assignments, and even grades for speaking and listening goals which were all combined to yield an overall semester grade for my class.

These two systems of assessment do not clearly match; however, for the sake of analyzing how my grades compare to the scores my students earned on the FSA, I needed to make a generalized comparison. I collapsed both scales into two categories to distinguish grade-level or above from below-grade level performance. I coded the correlation of their FSA score with my class grade as described in Table 3:

Table 3. *Correlation Between FSA Scores and Semester Grades*

	FSA score	Semester grades in my class
Below grade level performance	1–2	Not Meeting–Approaching
On or above grade level performance	3–5	Proficient–Expert

I compared students' FSA scores to their two semester grades in my class. The results for how all of my students' FSA scores correlate with my class grades are found in Table 4:

Table 4. *Percentage of Students' Scores Which Did and Did Not Correlate with Class Grades*

% of students whose FSA scores positively correlated with their semester grades in my class	% of students whose FSA scores were lower than their semester grades in my class	% of students whose FSA scores were higher than their semester grade in my class
80%	20%	0%

As a cohort, my students earned strong semester grades in my class; only four students scored Approaching, while all other semester grades were either Proficient or Expert. I see that in some cases my class grades are higher than the state test scores, but this finding is complicated. Yes, I believe I may need to adjust my rubrics or my use of them to align my grades a bit more closely with FSA results. However, I must keep in mind that a student's work in my class is different from taking an isolated high-stakes test. In my class students are offered and choose supports and are working in a collaborative environment that focuses on their process and growth over time. Yes, we are working on the same curricular goals as are measured by the FSA; however, individual differences will occur and some students will perform better in one of those environments than the other.

How Were Students Who Had Historically Struggled in Language Arts Supported in My Class?

My final piece of data focuses on four students whom I identified as historically struggling in language arts. I chose two boys and two girls, one of each was Black and one White, and three had IEPs or 504s in place for accommodations. I have known three of the four students since third grade and have always known them to struggle to work at grade level expectations in reading and

writing. However, as their teacher, I also saw how hard they worked, how much they have grown and matured, and how focused they were on their work in my class this year. These students are complex and not fully represented by the FSA scores or grades in my class. However, the fact that they received low FSA scores and Proficient grades in my class is worthy of consideration. Table 5 shows their FSA scores and semester grades in my class.

Table 5. *FSA Scores and Semester Grades for Four Students Who Traditionally Struggled in ELA*

Student	FSA score	Semester grades in my class
1	2	Proficient, Proficient
2	2	Proficient, Proficient
3	2	Expert, Proficient
4	1	Proficient, Proficient

These results leave me with many questions: What else could I do to better prepare them for the FSA? If these students had earned lower grades in my class, would that make a difference to them or their families as they compare grades to FSA results? Is it appropriate to expect my class grades to align with FSA results?

Implications for Practice

Moving forward I will continue to use SBG and a UDL framework, as I believe both benefitted students in my class. I will make the adjustments I discovered in my data and refine my use of rubrics. Finally, I will look closely at how students who have historically struggled in language arts are supported in my class and relate their experiences in my class to their experience with the FSA. The imperfect correlation between course grades and FSA scores is problematic; but is it my problem, the students' and their families' problem, or the Florida Department of Education's problem? How should we view students' classroom performance in relation to their performance on a high-stakes state assessment which is administered on one day months before receiving a score of their performance without being able to see the texts or items presented to the students or their responses? I am proud of how much my students improved in their reading and writing skills as well as how they learned to use tools and focus on goals through the SBG and UDL supports I offered. Until the FSA becomes more transparent and timely for teachers and students to reflect on student performance on specific items, it may be an elusive goal to better understand the relationship between course grades and FSA scores. Either way, I believe all students can benefit from SBG and UDL support in their daily experiences in their classes as they learn to advocate for themselves and what they need to succeed in school.

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Appendix A

How SBG, UDL, and CCC Influenced Program Development

Source of Influence	Aspects of Program Which Were Influenced
Standards Based Grading	• Rubrics focused on mastery of standards with categories "Expert," "Proficient," "Approaching Proficiency," and "Not Yet Proficient" • Use of rubrics for formative assessment, goal setting, and summative assessment
Universal Design for Learning	• Multiple Means of Engagement: Student-centered discussions to introduce units and make topics relevant to their lives • Multiple Means of Representation: Visual anchor charts to track unit development, examples and visual models of target skills, audio recordings of many texts, individual copies of read-aloud texts, many choices for texts during practice, technology support offered through Read-Write extension in Google Chromebooks, rubrics used for students to self-assess to set goals throughout unit • Multiple Means of Action and Expression: Choice in texts and/or topics, choice in mode for assessments such as paper-based or digital
Center for Collaborative Classroom Curricula, "Making Meaning" and "Being a Writer"	• Major units of study focused on genres and strategies • Anchor texts • Academic goals, such as reading and writing strategies • Social emotional goals

Appendix B

Student Survey After Mini-Unit

I am studying how I can help all students access my class and assignments.

Thinking about my "Unit 1 Reading Project" assignment in which you had to record questions and text features from a non-fiction book that you chose, I provided the following:

Will you please rate each on for how helpful it was to you?

Technique	
Modeling of the strategies during whole class lessons	
Anchor chart of text features	
Over 100 books to choose from	
Rubric for how the project would be graded	
My example project	
Google doc for the project in your ELA google folder	
Options for the project, such as google doc, paper version of the google doc, google slides, poster, conference, whole class presentation, private sharing with Mrs. Beckett	
Conferencing with Mrs. Beckett and peers to check on your progress	
Time in class to work on the assignment	

Did I do anything else that helped you?

Which of these were most helpful to you? Why?

What made this assignment challenging for you?

Is there anything you would suggest I do next year to help those sixth graders with this assignment?