



Equity at the Center: A Tool for Assessing Communication about Teaching and Learning

Introduction

A core purpose of student-centered teaching and learning is to ensure that education is a lever for both equity and social justice. Woven into the Students at the Center Framework¹ is an interest in surfacing ways this framework can provide a more equitable learning environment for historically underserved students. Many times, this commitment to equity and social justice can get lost in the messaging and communications about student-centered teaching and learning. Understanding this, the Students at the Center team took a hard look at our own digital communication and developed a tool for assessing—and changing—the way we message and communicate with our audience.

In recognizing that “equity gaps” in digital taxonomy, design, and messaging can perpetuate inequities, the team engaged a consultant to support us in reviewing our text and messaging, resources, and to provide a set of recommendations for how the Students at the Center Hub (the Hub) can improve upon language, ability, and cultural competence. Three products emerged from this effort:

- An evaluation report
- A resource and tool rubric to assess the resources provided on the Hub
- A text and messaging rubric to assess how or what we communicate on the Hub

This exercise was incredibly valuable to the Students at the Center initiative. In an effort to share this process, the team has adapted the text and messaging rubric for:

- School and district Leaders
- Intermediary organizations and foundations interested in supporting student-centered learning and personalization

¹Student-centered learning is personalized, competency-based, student-owned, and takes place anytime, anywhere. For the full framework, visit www.studentsatthecenterhub.org/interactive-framework

The Text and Messaging Rubric

The Text and Messaging rubric was designed to assess the Hub’s ability to use text and messaging to engage diverse stakeholders and provide multiple means of representation, action, expression, and engagement with our content and messaging. The rubric utilizes the principles of Universal Design for Learning as a foundation for the criteria. Universal Design for Learning (UDL)² is a set of principles for curriculum development and learning environments that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn, and is flexible and customizable. The rubric uses these four of the nine [UDL Guidelines](#):

1. Provide options for perception
2. Provide options for language
3. Provide options for comprehension
4. Provide options for recruiting interest

This rubric can be used as part of a broader equity effort, or to assess a school or organization’s own messaging, website, or digital medium. Full engagement with the rubric can offer insights to further the goal of providing everyone opportunity and access to information about practicing student-centered learning strategies and beyond. The rubric also provides the opportunity to think through actionable steps—reinforced with examples from the Hub’s assessment and action—and can be adapted for use in any kind of written messaging that reaches a diverse audience.

How to Utilize the Rubric

1. Choose one messaging tool (“tool”) that you use in your work. This can be something you or your school/organization has created, such as a class or school website, or a frequently used external resource, such as an online toolkit.
2. Identify the PURPOSE and INTENDED AUDIENCE for your tool.
3. With your tool in mind, review each of the six messaging and language criterion and categories.
4. For each criterion, decide where your tool fits on the scale (growth opportunity, mostly present, or mastery).
5. Review your audit findings and consider what next steps are needed to bring your tool to (or towards) mastery for each criterion. If you’re auditing a tool that was not created by you or your school community, you may determine that the tool should be replaced by a more equitable option.

²Home | National Center On Universal Design for Learning. (2017). Udlcenter.org. Retrieved 18 February 2017, from <http://www.udlcenter.org/>

6. After you've identified your next steps, determine whether each is:
- **Actionable Immediately**—can be accomplished using minimal human resources. More specifically, the decision to implement involves no more than 1 to 2 people and requires less than 4-8 hours to execute.
 - **Actionable with Effort** —requires more than 2 people and more than 8 hours to execute. Implementation also involves some technical support or expertise.
 - **A Long-Term Consideration** —involves significant human resources, such as broader buy-in and agreement and may include other teams such as IT or Communications.

Text and Image Messaging Rubric

Purpose _____

Intended Audience _____

Criterion One: Offer multiple ways of customizing the display (digital)			
Categories			
Providing Options for Perception	<p>Growth Opportunity– None or very little of the information is customizable. Users are wholly unable to manipulate the text or images, their size, color, or sound.</p>	<p>Mostly Present– Information is slightly flexible. There are features that can be varied but only customizable in text size, not color or sound.</p>	<p>Mastery– Information displays in a flexible format so that the perceptual features can be varied, such as the size of text, images, graphs, tables, or other visual content; the contrast between background and text or images; the color used for information or emphasis; the volume or rate of speech or sound, and; the speed or timing of video, animation, sound, simulations, etc.</p>
Determine Category & notes			
Level of action needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Actionable Immediately <input type="checkbox"/> Actionable with Effort <input type="checkbox"/> Long-term Considerations 		

Providing Options for Perception	Criterion Two: Offer multiple alternatives to visual information (digital)		
	Categories		
	Growth Opportunity – None of the images are accompanied by descriptions (either text or spoken), and none of the images, graphics, and videos use touch equivalents.	Mostly Present – Some descriptions of images are present or some auditory cues for key concepts and transitions in visual information are present, but not both.	Mastery – Provide descriptions (text or spoken) for all images, graphics, video, or animations, and auditory cues for key concepts and transitions in visual information.
Determine Category & notes			
Level of action needed	<input type="checkbox"/> Actionable Immediately <input type="checkbox"/> Actionable with Effort <input type="checkbox"/> Long-term Considerations		

Criterion Three: Clarifies vocabulary			
Categories			
Provide options for language and symbols	<p>Growth Opportunity– No scaffolding techniques are used when introducing users to new vocabulary, complex terms, or concepts.</p>	<p>Mostly Present– When introducing vocabulary, some alternative text descriptions or embedded supports are provided to explain core concepts and definitions.</p>	<p>Mastery– Provide graphic symbols with alternative text descriptions and embed support for vocabulary and symbols within the text (e.g., hyperlinks or footnotes to definitions, explanations, illustrations, previous coverage, translations).</p>
Determine Category & notes			
Level of action needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Actionable Immediately <input type="checkbox"/> Actionable with Effort <input type="checkbox"/> Long-term Considerations 		

Provide options for language and symbols	Criterion Four: Support understanding across languages		
	Categories		
	<p>Growth Opportunity– Stakeholders whose dominant language is not English are narrowly supported or not supported at all.</p>	<p>Mostly Present– Messaging supports understanding across languages in one or two ways (e.g., multi-lingual information, clarifying vocabulary and domain-specific terminology). However, limited alternatives are presented for English Language Learners and those with less experience in education.</p>	<p>Mastery–Messaging makes most-to-all key information in the dominant language (e.g., English) also available in first languages (e.g., Spanish) for learners with limited-English proficiency; links key vocabulary words to definitions and pronunciations in both dominant and heritage languages, and defines domain-specific vocabulary using both domain-specific and common terms.</p>
Determine Category & notes			
Level of action needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Actionable Immediately <input type="checkbox"/> Actionable with Effort <input type="checkbox"/> Long-term Considerations 		

Provide options for comprehension	Criterion Five: Highlights all critical concepts		
	Categories		
	Growth Opportunity – Neither text nor images emphasize key ideas or concepts, nor is emphasis used to draw attention to critical features.	Mostly Present – Some key ideas and concepts in text and images are emphasized or multiple examples are used to emphasize critical features. One of these techniques, but not both, is present.	Mastery –Materials highlight or emphasize key elements in text, graphics, or diagrams to emphasize key ideas, concepts and relationships, and provide multiple examples to emphasize critical features.
Determine Category & notes			
Level of action needed	<input type="checkbox"/> Actionable Immediately <input type="checkbox"/> Actionable with Effort <input type="checkbox"/> Long-term Considerations		

Criterion Six: Materials optimize relevance, value, and authenticity			
Categories			
Provide options for recruiting interest, sustaining effort and persistence	Growth Opportunity – None of the text or images are contextualized to learner’s lives, nor are they culturally or socially relevant, etc.	Mostly Present –Some text or some images are contextualized to learner’s lives, and are culturally relevant and responsive, etc.	Mastery –To engage all learners equally, sources of information are varied so that they can be contextualized to learners’ lives, culturally relevant and responsive, socially relevant, age and ability appropriate, and appropriate for different racial, cultural, ethnic, and gender groups.
	Determine Category & notes		
Level of action needed	<input type="checkbox"/> Actionable Immediately <input type="checkbox"/> Actionable with Effort <input type="checkbox"/> Long-term Considerations		

Setting Next Steps

Actionable immediately

Recommendations for that are “actionable immediately” can be accomplished using minimal human resources. More specifically, the decision to implement involves no more than 1 to 2 people and requires less than 4-8 hours to execute. Implementation requires little or no technical skill and can be achieved utilizing current functionalities.

Criterion	Action Needed	Potential Partners
<p>Criterion 3: Students at the Center Hub clarifies vocabulary</p>	<p>While all key concepts are supported within the framework, there may be additional opportunities to reinforce interrelated concepts. One area of opportunity occurs within blogs. For example, in the blog post titled “Three Ways Student Voice Can Elevate Motivation and Engagement,” the terms “motivation” and “engagement” are driving concepts but they are not clearly defined. By adding brief definitions or contextual explanations, site visitors are not only sure to understand the concept, but they are better situated to understand how engagement and motivation relate to other concepts mentioned in the blog. Deepened learning is the goal here.</p> <p>Exemplary Text and Image Messaging:</p> <p>“Students at the Center Framework page” introduces new vocabulary and provides multiple supports for understanding the key concepts. New vocabulary is introduced, a description is provided, and links to “related resources” lead site visitors to multimedia resources for deeper learning.</p>	<p>N/A (in-house expertise)</p>
<p>Notes</p>		

Actionable with Effort

The decision to implement recommendations under the “actionable with effort” category requires more than 2 people and more than 8 hours to execute. Implementation also involves some technical support or expertise.

Criterion	Action needed	Potential Partners
Criterion 1: Students at the Center Hub offers multiple ways of customizing the display	<p>The Hub is a feature-rich platform which provides a delightful user experience for most, but not for all. Consult with developer to discuss options for access-friendly customization. Consider the Students at the Center framework tools and Educator Competencies tool. How might users further customize the interactive tools to suit the needs users with varying abilities?</p> <p>Resources:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Tips for improving website accessibility2. Color Contrast Checker3. Contrast resources from Stanford4. “Full Background Manager” for WordPress is a plugin example	Web Developer
Notes		

Long-Term Considerations

Implementation of “long-term considerations” involves significant human resources, such as broader team agreements (including leadership) and may include other teams such as Knowledge Management and Information Technology or Communications.

Criterion	Action Needed	Potential Partners
<p>Criterion 4: Students at the Center Hub supports understanding across languages</p>	<p>Given the Hub’s audience of families and students, offering content in a variety of languages is important part of equitable messaging and content delivery. If site-wide translation is not an immediate option, focus on updating pages/resources that said users would most interact with.</p> <p>For Example:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus on those areas of the site where ELL visitors are most likely to visit. Look to Students at the Center Hub user profiles to understand language access needs of your visitors. Are your ELL visitors more likely to be parents, educators, or both? The answer to this will help prioritize your efforts. 2. Provide translation and pronunciation support for the Students at the Center framework and featured tools. 3. Incorporate first languages in event announcements and social media posts. 	<p>OneAmerica—formerly Hate Free Zone (the OneAmerica website is available in seven languages, including English)</p>
<p>Notes</p>		

Glossary of UDL Guidelines

UDL Guideline One: Provides Options for Perception

When all learners can perceive key information in formats that do not require “extraordinary effort or assistance²,” everyone wins. This criterion considers whether we provide the same information through different modalities (e.g., through vision, hearing, or touch), and providing information in a format that will allow for adjustability by the user (e.g., text that can be enlarged, sounds that can be amplified).”

UDL Guideline Two: Provides Options for Language

How are learners with different backgrounds, languages and knowledge accommodated? This criterion focuses primarily on key information and assesses instances where “idioms, archaic expressions, culturally exclusive phrases, and slang²” are used—and if so, whether they are translated to enhance accessibility. Curricular materials are most often monolingual while many learners are not. This criterion considers the ways in which your tool provides alternatives to English but focuses primarily on key information, such as key concepts and definitions.

UDL Guideline Three: Provides Options for Comprehension

This criterion seeks to assess the ability to activate or supply background knowledge by providing options for understanding key information, concepts, and definitions and evaluates how well your tool highlights patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships. Imparting knowledge is an important goal, but accessibility to information has limitations when the information is not useable.

UDL Guideline Seven: Provides Options for Recruiting Interest

This criterion seeks to understand how your tool recruits interest by assessing its ability to optimize individual choice and autonomy. The demand to make content relevant to learners has its merits; “information that is not attended to, that does not engage learners’ cognition, is in fact inaccessible...because relevant information goes unnoticed and unprocessed².” Learners differ in what engages them and over time, preferences for engagement will change.

The Students at Center Hub team would like to acknowledge the incredible work of consultant Lena Carew, Co-founder and COO of The Justice Collective, and her team, contributors Laura Ann Jacobs and Bianca Gentry, who worked with the Hub team on the conception of this equity project, and authored the report and rubrics that inform this tool.