

Why Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Matters

Creating Opportunities for
Inclusive, Equitable Education

Edited by

Sharon Hartle
University of Verona

Emanuela Tenca

*Saint Camillus International University of Health
and Medical Sciences in Rome*

Series in Education



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This book offers a timely and valuable exploration of Universal Design for Learning as a persuasive response to widening global educational inequalities. By connecting theory, policy, and practice, it demonstrates how UDL's flexible, learner-centred principles can aptly support inclusion, accessibility, and equity across diverse and crisis-affected educational contexts.

Prof. Dr. Roberta Facchinetti
Chair of English Language and Linguistics
University of Verona, Italy

"Why Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Matters" brings together a broad range of international scholarship to demonstrate both the ethical urgency and the practical power of UDL in contemporary education. Combining rigorous theoretical grounding with rich case studies, the volume spans higher education, assessment, language teaching, informal and technology-enhanced learning, and lifelong education for migrants and older adults. Hartle and Tenca's edited collection shows how learner variability can be embraced as a pedagogical resource rather than a problem. The book offers educators, researchers, and policymakers a compelling, research-informed vision of inclusive and equitable education, while providing concrete strategies for removing barriers to learning in diverse global contexts.

Franca Poppi
Professor of English Linguistics and Translation
University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy

The book provides the most up-to-date investigation to date of an exciting yet still underexplored area of education: Universal Design for Learning. The breadth of topics covered is impressive. Welcome inclusions are chapters on the application of UDL to the teaching of second languages other than English. A must-read for 21st century educators at all levels!

Prof. Dr. Andrea Nava
Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy

Hartle and Tenca's volume offers a compelling exploration of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Through case studies spanning disability, assessment practices, and foreign language teaching, the book shows how UDL shifts attention from accommodating individual learners to redesigning institutional settings around learner variability. Rather than offering a single solution, the volume positions UDL as an evolving framework for negotiating equity in increasingly diverse educational contexts. As such, it is especially valuable for researchers and practitioners seeking to balance inclusion with rigor in contemporary education.

Prof. Luciana Pedrazzini
Department of Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Mediations
Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy

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Foreword

Manuel Boschiero

University of Verona

Although inclusive education is now a consistent feature of international institutional agendas, it is still struggling to become widely adopted as a global practice. Discrimination still exists and there are many legal, economic and cultural barriers. Following the pandemic, new inequalities have emerged and been exacerbated by ongoing and spreading conflicts in various regions worldwide. Designing learning environments that are adequate, rigorous, equitable and inclusive is therefore an urgent necessity in the rapidly evolving landscape of contemporary education. The aim is to take concrete steps towards creating more inclusive societies. This is particularly true of higher education institutions, where the next generation of teachers, specialists and citizens in general are prepared for their future roles. Increasing diversity demands pedagogical frameworks that can proactively respond to learner variability. It is in this context that *Why Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Matters* makes its valuable and insightful contribution.

This volume's defining features are not only its extensive thematic breadth and array of critical and methodological approaches, but also the depth of expertise and experience of its editors, Sharon Hartle and Emanuela Tenca. Their commitment to accessibility, inclusive pedagogy and language education in higher education is evident in their publications, projects and comprehensive professional background, which combines theoretical reflection, experimental analysis and teaching practice.

The genesis of this book can be traced back to the collaboration of Hartle and Tenca, which was developed within the GIAM research project "Verso una Glottodidattica Inclusiva e Accessibile: un Modello di insegnamento efficace e applicabile" ("Towards accessibility and inclusion in language teaching: an effective, applicable teaching model"; University of Verona; 2021-2023). This project involved scholars from a variety of academic disciplines with the aim of developing inclusive teaching practices in second language acquisition, particularly focusing on Russian and English. The objective of the research project was to apply the principles of UDL to task-based language teaching (TBLT). The importance of an interdisciplinary perspective and a variety of analytical approaches in implementing teaching practices was recognised

during this UDL-based project, and subsequently guided the composition of this volume.

Another factor that contributed to the creation of this collection was the Excellence Project “Inclusive Humanities”. Following a positive evaluation by the Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of the University System and Research, the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Verona received a substantial ministerial grant for an interdisciplinary project dedicated to inclusivity in teaching, research, dissemination activities and infrastructures (Excellence Project, 2023-2027). Within this framework, the department has defined its strategic development for the next five years, fostering a wide range of research and teaching innovations, experimental practices and editorial initiatives, including the present volume.

Both editors have placed particular emphasis in their studies on the UDL principles in higher education. Hartle has specifically examined how UDL principles can be applied to English language teaching in Italian universities, emphasising the importance of education responding to student variability through flexible, multimodal approaches from the initial stage of instructional design.

Similarly, Tenca has explored the relationship between UDL and English language teaching, focusing on the needs of students with special educational needs (SEN), particularly through empirical studies on inclusive language teaching, accessible assessment and curriculum design.

In their introduction, they provide an overview of UDL in the context of global educational challenges. They illustrate its student-centred approach and explain why it is important for addressing the inequalities that characterise education in the post-pandemic era. Particular attention is given to the opportunities presented by the implementation of the UDL framework and to the intersection of inclusive design with practical classroom activities and institutional structures.

Hartle and Tenca’s editorial collaboration reflects their shared vision that inclusion can only be realised if it is considered an essential organisational principle of high-quality education, not an add-on. This vision is evident in the architecture of the volume itself. Combining theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, case-based reflections and methodological innovations, Hartle and Tenca have curated a collection that is rigorous from a methodological point of view, thoughtful towards context and anchored in the ethical imperative to “remove barriers to learning for individuals with different needs” (Introduction, p. 7).

The editors' experience also contributes to shaping the interdisciplinary and global orientation of the volume, with contributions from Europe, South America and multilingual educational contexts, but also with the hope, for the future, of further expansion to other contexts and geographical areas. Their sensitivity to linguistic, cultural and disciplinary diversity is informed by their professional experience working with heterogeneous learner groups and developing pedagogical models – such as the integration of UDL with task-based language teaching or open architecture curricular design – that have already shown measurable impact in classroom settings.

The book's central premise is that UDL should be considered not as a prescriptive model, but as an evolving, adaptable, context-sensitive framework that enables educators to design for diversity from the outset. The basis of this perspective is the belief that education is an inclusive and collaborative endeavour, where learners' differences are recognised as valuable resources rather than obstacles.

The editors provide readers with a selection of essays addressing various approaches and perspectives, and they also guide readers through the world of UDL, exploring its historical evolution, current implementation, and potential future developments. The essays shed light on under-explored areas such as accessibility for older adults and migrant students and languages with complex spelling systems (see Introduction, pp. 11-13). They also suggest ways to address global educational inequalities in the future.

It is therefore a pleasure to present a volume in which theoretical reflection, practical experience, and an ethical commitment to inclusion are closely intertwined. The work of the editors and contributors reminds us that the UDL framework not only improves learning outcomes but also promotes an equitable and humane vision of education, firmly oriented towards the well-being of all students.

Introduction

Sharon Hartle

University of Verona

Emanuela Tenca

*Saint Camillus International University
of Health and Medical Sciences in Rome*

1. Universal Design for Learning: why it matters

This volume collects chapters by international authors focusing on the main reasons why Universal Design for Learning (UDL) matters, and thus it targets all stakeholders involved in inclusive, equitable education, including instructors, researchers, administrators, and policymakers. In order to understand the value of a learner-centred didactic framework at this historical timepoint, it is fundamental to consider global education in broader terms. The need for inclusion in education, in fact, is reinforced across the whole world by frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These were launched in 2015 as a global call to action, addressing critical issues such as poverty, inequality, and education. Despite some initial positive developments, however, at the midpoint between 2015 and 2030 it seems clear that progress towards these objectives is not being made. The 2023 Sustainable Development Goals Report states that progress on more than 50% of the goals is weak (United Nations 2023). Goal Four of the SDGs focuses specifically on education, calling for countries to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030 (United Nations 2022, 11). Both the widespread instances of war as well as the COVID-19 pandemic have played their roles in slowing progress and in some cases have even reversed it. Disparities in access to education remain, particularly for students with disabilities, girls, and those from marginalised communities (UNESCO 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic in particular is responsible for “devastating impacts on education, causing learning losses in four out of five of the 104 countries studied” (United Nations 2023, 3). UNESCO reports, in fact, highlight ways in which the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in education systems worldwide, disproportionately affecting learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Children with disabilities, those living in poverty, and students from marginalised ethnic or linguistic

communities faced multiple and intersecting barriers to accessing remote learning (Walters 2020). In Europe, school closures and the shift to online instruction revealed stark digital divides: a lack of access to devices, reliable internet, and quiet study environments hampered students' learning to differing degrees depending on socioeconomic factors (Blaskó et al. 2022). A case study from the Netherlands showed that even in a highly developed digital infrastructure, students from less-educated households suffered significantly greater learning losses compared to their peers (Haelermans et al. 2022). These disparities underline the urgent need for inclusive and resilient education systems that can ensure continuity and equity in learning opportunities, particularly during crises. Whilst 30 of the countries studied in the UNESCO report were considered to be making fair progress towards quality education, 40 were judged to be in a state of stagnation or regression, and no data was available for the remaining countries. Clearly, to ensure inclusion and sustainability, a radical transformation in our approach to education is needed as well as a fundamental shift in the way we work in classrooms. One tool which may contribute to doing this is UDL.

Although UDL itself is not a new framework, it provides a series of highly flexible strategies, based on three central principles of engagement, representation, and action and expression, which will be outlined below, and which are investigated in depth by authors contributing to this volume, both from theoretical and practical viewpoints. The post-pandemic world features an increasingly diverse and complex educational landscape, with socioeconomic, geographical and multicultural settings that produce learners who have very different needs and learning styles. Because of its flexibility and focus on the role of learners and their learning process, UDL is a useful framework of reference for learner-centred teaching, which is not prescriptive and can be adapted to meet the needs of local contexts.

We focus particularly, in this volume, on the question of accessibility to learning and inclusion, aspects of learning already highlighted by the United Nations as being essential elements of an education system that aims to develop individuals who are fully able to participate in society (United Nations 2015). As we recover from the emergency remote teaching (ERT) period (Hodges et al. 2020) imposed during the pandemic, we must now attempt to learn the lessons that remote teaching taught us. Access to learning, indeed, was revealed, particularly during this period, to be lacking for many learners, for whom classical educational delivery was not accessible, due to factors such as insufficient infrastructures or lack of trained teachers. This inaccessibility inevitably creates inequality (Blaskó et al. 2022; UNESCO 2020; Walters 2020) and must be addressed as a matter of urgency. UDL is one framework which

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About the Editors

Sharon Hartle is an associate professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Verona. She has been involved in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) since 1983 and teacher training since 1989. She has focused on teaching in Higher Education since 1992 and is specialised in e-learning, blended learning and multimedia materials development. She began to introduce elements of digital teaching into her work in 1999 and developed her first teaching website in 2001. She worked as a speaking examiner team leader for Cambridge Assessment, for the areas of Verona, Vicenza and Mantua for several years and was a member of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language special interest group: Testing, Evaluation and Assessment (TEASIG) from 2015 to 2020, where her major role was to co-mediate the regular assessment webinars. She has also collaborated in the development of assessment systems at the University of Verona and the Free University of Bolzano.

Currently, her teaching covers undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral courses as well as teacher training courses at a range of levels.

She has published widely on topics related to her field both in Italy and internationally and her research interests are increasingly focused on accessible, inclusive ELT methodologies. She is, at present, working specifically in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English Medium Instruction (EMI), both from the point of view of course design and implementation and assessment, which is another of her key areas of interest.

Emanuela Tenca is a temporary assistant professor of English Language and Translation at the Saint Camillus International University of Health and Medical Sciences in Rome. She holds a PhD in Human Sciences from the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (2015), and between 2015 and 2025 she held positions as adjunct professor in English Language and Translation in a number of undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs at the Universities of Padua, Parma, Modena and Reggio Emilia, Verona, and Milan. She has also experience as a trainer in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses for English language teachers. In 2022 Emanuela Tenca participated in the project “Towards accessibility and inclusion in language teaching: an effective, applicable teaching model” (University of Verona) as a post-doctoral researcher. Between 2023 and 2025 she participated in the project “History of second language teaching. A digital archive of ELT materials

in Italy (1900-2000)” (University of Milan) as a post-doctoral researcher. Emanuela Tenca’s research interests include English language teaching and learning, also from a historical perspective, inclusive and accessible foreign language education, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and corpus-assisted discourse analysis.

About the Contributors

Aleshia V. A. Allert, Ed.D., is an educator currently attached to The University of the West Indies, Global Campus. She serves as a Course Instructor and Research Supervisor in areas of Academic Writing and research in education, respectively. She has over twenty-two years' experience in the education arena as a secondary and tertiary educator. She is a published author, whose work primarily covers educational leadership in Caribbean and African school systems and leadership in virtual teams for online learning. She has also done scholarly work in inclusive education and facilitating critical thinking through artificial intelligence in online learning spaces. In addition to having extensive training in facilitating adult learners of varying professional backgrounds, she has expertise in research administration, which she uses to support research initiatives for improving practices in education systems.

Giorgia Andreolli is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute for Applied Linguistics (Eurac Research) in Bolzano/Bozen, Italy. She earned her PhD in Foreign Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics from the University of Verona, focusing on digital instructional materials in English Language Teaching. Giorgia Andreolli also holds an MA in Language Sciences from Ca' Foscari University of Venice and a BA in Languages and Cultures for International Commerce from the University of Verona. As a member of the Framework for Open and Reproducible Research Training (FORRT), she actively promotes open scholarship and open education, advocating for accessibility and equity in academic work. Open education matters to her because it helps reduce structural barriers in academia, fosters participation, and challenges dominant systems of knowledge production. Her research interests include language education, educational materials, critical pedagogy, and open science. Giorgia Andreolli is committed to advancing inclusive practices and supporting dialogue in linguistically diverse contexts.

Judy Costanza Beltrán Rojas is a psychologist, speech-language pathologist, and Ph.D. in Clinical and Cognitive Neuropsychology from the National University of Colombia. Her experience focuses on the assessment, diagnosis, and rehabilitation of cognitive functions in older adults, with an emphasis on language, memory, and attention. She has developed her clinical work at the National University Hospital of Colombia, particularly in cognitive evaluation and rehabilitation processes. In addition, she has participated in initiatives for

the social appropriation of knowledge and in cognitive-stimulation programs aimed at older adults, with a special interest in technologies, healthy aging, and neurodegenerative diseases.

Melissa Bishop, Dr., is an Assistant Professor at Cape Breton University. A former elementary and kindergarten teacher, her scholarship is grounded in the belief that narrative inquiry can illuminate the complexities of teaching and learning. Melissa Bishop's research examines how educators develop their understanding of themselves and their work through personal, professional, and cultural narratives, with a particular focus on rural teacher identity as it evolves across institutional contexts and through engagement with curriculum as both content and lived experience. Her most recent project examined geographical disparities among Early Childhood Educators in Atlantic Canada, co-creating dialogic spaces for reflection and professional growth. Central to her research is an emphasis on authentic assessment in the early years, privileging observation, documentation, and play-based approaches that capture the richness of children's learning experiences. These practices are explored as narrative acts that inform educator identity and contribute to more equitable and meaningful understandings of learning. Her work seeks to bridge theory and practice by centring stories as sources of insight, transformation, and assessment innovation.

Serena Dal Maso is a linguist and researcher in second language acquisition and language education at the Department of Cultures and Civilizations, University of Verona (Italy). Her research primarily focuses on the acquisition of academic language among learners of Italian as a second language, with particular attention to students with an immigrant background who speak a different language at home. She has extensively studied the acquisition of morphologically complex words, investigating how morphological awareness develops in bilingual children and how it supports language and literacy development. Her work also examines the integration of lexical morphology into educational practice. She is especially interested in reading comprehension and in instructional strategies to support its development. In addition, she has been involved in projects on literacy acquisition among low-educated or unschooled adults, aimed at supporting the development of their reading and writing skills.

Cristina Dumitru, Dr., is an Associate Professor at the Department of Education at the University of Pitești and coordinator of several Erasmus project on Education and Specific Learning Disorders. She received her

Bachelor's degree in Special education and her Master's degree in Rehabilitation in special education at University of Bucharest, Romania. With 20 years of teaching and research experience in working with SEN students, Cristina Dumitru is active in special education and inclusive education practice. Additionally, she has written several manuscripts on special education topics. She also has a degree in Applied Foreign Language having a strong interest in languages as well.

Lisa Francis-Charles, Dr., serves as director of Faculty Development in the Leadership and Excellence in Academic Development (LEAD) unit, Department of Educational Services at St. George's University, Grenada. Dr. Francis-Charles is also an assistant professor in the Master of Education program. Dr. Francis-Charles earned a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership with a focus on Adult Learning and a Master's in Curriculum and Instruction at the American College of Education. Her research interests include, but are not limited to, promoting teaching excellence and exploring learners' perspectives of teaching and learning. Her core values are life-long learning, equity, and collaboration.

Jhon Alexander Garcia Camargo is an Electrical Engineer and holds a Master's degree in Industrial Engineering. He is currently a PhD candidate in Engineering, Industry, and Organisations. He has more than ten years of professional experience combining technical expertise, university teaching, and the strategic management of high-level projects. His career has developed at the intersection of engineering, innovation, and organisational development. He previously served as Scientific Advisor and Project Manager at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, where he led interdisciplinary teams within innovation and experimentation environments such as LAB101. His work has focused on the integration of training processes, creativity, and emerging technologies in complex institutional settings. He has also provided specialised consulting in project formulation, innovation ecosystems, and digital transformation. His professional profile stands out for his ability to coordinate complex operations, translate technical knowledge into actionable strategies, and articulate engineering practices with effective organisational management. His current research interests include industrial systems, organisational performance, innovation management, and the development of socio-technical solutions for institutional contexts.

Diane Montgomery, Dr., is a sessional instructor of inclusive education practices in the Bachelor of Education and Master of Education programs at

the University of Prince Edward Island. She is also an educational therapist who helps students of all ability levels in the K-12 environment. She utilises a variety of cognitive skills and specialised literacy programs to help students understand how they learn, so they want to learn. Diane Montgomery's research interests include inclusive education, assessments for learning, and educational leadership. She believes all students have the ability to succeed when their needs are supported within the classroom. Thereby, her research focuses on a theory to practice approach applying her research to overcome existing inequities and access to inclusive educational support. Diane Montgomery's recent project was the research and development of a holistic online assessment tool to help teachers identify and support the diverse needs of students in inclusive classrooms while increasing student motivation.

Maria Cristina Nisco, PhD in English for Special Purposes, is an Associate Professor of English Language and Translation Studies at the University of Naples 'Parthenope'. Her research areas include identity and diversity in news, legal and social media discourse, through the lens offered by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and corpus linguistics. She has published extensively on the linguistic and discursive construal of ethnic and gender diversity, migration, disability, and hate speech. Among her recent publications, "Analyzing Intersectional Ableist and Fatphobic Discourses in Digital Spaces. The Case of TikTok" (co-authored with Raffone, 2025), "Disability in EU's Institutional Discourse: An Analysis of Terminology" (2024), "Framing Disability and Sexuality: An Analysis of Instagram Users' Comments" (2023), the *International Journal of Language Studies* special issue on "Disability, Shame and Discrimination" (co-edited with Hughes, 2022, 16/4), "Online Abuse and Disability Hate Speech" (2020), "Disability in the Populist Press: An Investigation of British Tabloids" (2019). She is also the co-editor in chief of the international peer-reviewed *I-LanD Journal* (with Caliendo), and a founding member of the I-LanD Research Centre.

Nhora Paulina Parra-Ortiz is a linguist and design researcher at the National University of Colombia, where she is completing a Master's in Design. Her work focuses on the relationship between language, accessibility, and digital learning, with particular attention to how users interpret and act upon interface conditions in educational and public-sector contexts. She has contributed to projects on inclusive pedagogy, STEAM education, and digital transformation, developing instructional methodologies and accessible content for universities, community programs, and institutional initiatives. Nhora Paulina Parra-Ortiz has served as a researcher and editorial lead in interdisciplinary teams dedicated to innovation in education and technology.

Her recent work examines the role of agentive semiotics in the construction of user archetypes for accessible web design, exploring how interpretive assumptions shape early design decisions. She has presented at international conferences including ICERI (Seville) and INTED (Valencia), and participated in the Next Generation Digital Action program at the Digital Tech Summit (Copenhagen). Her current research interests include accessibility practices in design, semiotic approaches to human–computer interaction, and methods for improving the interpretive foundations of user modelling.

Sabrina Piccinin holds a PhD in Linguistics and is currently an Assistant Professor of Educational Linguistics at the University of Verona, Italy. Her research focuses on second and foreign language acquisition and inclusive language education. She is particularly interested in language development and processing, with research on the acquisition of derivational morphology and on reading and text comprehension processes. She has been involved in several research projects focused on the linguistic integration of children and adults with migrant backgrounds. In particular, her work has addressed the development of morphological skills and reading comprehension in children, as well as the development of basic reading and writing skills among adult migrant learners with low literacy levels. A further strand of her research concerns language testing and assessment from an inclusive and accessible perspective, including the adaptation of assessment practices for diverse learner populations.

Giorgia Pomaroli, Dr., is a Temporary Assistant Professor of Slavic Studies at the University of Verona, Italy. She holds a PhD in Foreign Literatures, Languages and Linguistics. Her research interests include cultural linguistics, sociolinguistics, and second language instruction, with a particular emphasis on Russian as a Foreign Language. She is also interested in inclusive and accessible language education, applying UDL to promote equity in language acquisition. She has published several papers and the volume *Didattica inclusiva e accessibile del russo LS. Sfide, esperienze, prospettive* [Inclusive and Accessible Teaching of Russian as a Foreign Language: Challenges, Experiences, Perspectives] (2025). She is the coordinator of the Erasmus+ project “InTeaCHE – Inclusive and Trauma-Informed Practices in Foreign Language Teaching: Strengthening HE Connections between Ukraine and the EU” (2025). She also coordinates the Task-Based Language Teaching working group at the Interuniversity Research Centre *LinE* – Language in Education.

Domenico Tafuri is Full Professor of Special Education and Pedagogy at the University of Naples “Parthenope”. Prof. Tafuri is the Director of the Department of Medical, Human Movement and Well-being Sciences and University Referent for Students with Disabilities. He is the author of several publications in national and international journals concerning the methodology of teaching-learning processes, the promotion of pedagogical interventions, and inclusion methodologies. His scientific activity focuses on innovative didactic approaches, inclusive education models and the enhancement of educational processes in both formal and non-formal contexts. He has participated in numerous national and international research projects and conferences, contributing to the scientific debate on special education and teacher training. His academic commitment is also oriented toward the development of educational policies and practices aimed at fostering equity, accessibility and quality in educational systems.

Maria Vender is Associate Professor of Educational Linguistics at the University of Verona (Italy). Her research examines language acquisition and reading comprehension across typical and atypical development, with particular attention to developmental dyslexia, bilingual development, and the interaction between neurodevelopmental disorders and multilingualism. She has authored several publications on bilingualism, dyslexia, and inclusive teaching practices, focusing on the linguistic processes that support reading and language development in both typical and vulnerable populations. She has taken part in numerous competitive national and international research projects and currently serves as PI of the Verona Unit of the national PRIN-PNRR project READING CompreHension for inclusion (REACH), which investigates linguistic competence and text comprehension in typically developing children, children with dyslexia, and bilingual children with a migrant background, employing eye-tracking to capture online processing during reading. Her wider research agenda examines how linguistic and cognitive abilities develop across diverse learner profiles to inform inclusive educational practices, and how targeted interventions can strengthen literacy in vulnerable populations, promoting reading as a resource for well-being and for language development across the lifespan.

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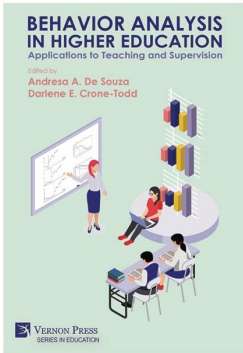
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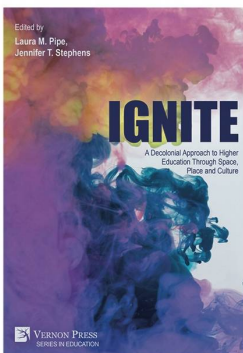
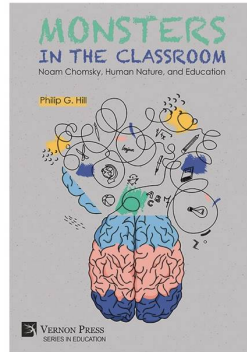
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