A journey towards creating an inclusive classroom: How Universal Design for Learning has transformed my teaching

Kari Kumar,
University of Ontario Institute of Technology

Author's Contact Information

Kari Kumar
Lecturer, Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Ontario Institute of Technology
Oshawa, ON, Canada
Tel: 905-721-8688 Ext. 3166
Email: kari.kumar@uoit.ca

Abstract:

This essay describes my journey towards creating an inclusive classroom. An overview of the path that led me towards Universal Design for Learning (UDL) from teaching to my own learning style, to recognizing diversity in my learners, and to ultimately attempting to facilitate success of all students (including those with learning limitations such as learning disabilities) is described. The philosophy of UDL suggests relieving students of the burden to adapt in order to succeed, by instead imparting flexibility into course design to accommodate student diversity. Powerful messages of UDL include providing a supportive learning environment and allowing multiple methods to reach learning goals. Responses of my students towards teaching practices inspired by UDL have been positive, and this has also resulted in more rewarding teaching experiences for me. UDL practices are achievable by all educators who adopt a willingness to place student needs at the forefront of course delivery.

Key Words:

universal design for learning; inclusive classroom; student diversity; learning disability; adult education.

Introduction

I began teaching at the post-secondary level in a manner that appealed to my own learning style. Having been an academically strong student myself, I felt that I understood the formula for student success and that I could be an effective instructor by guiding my students towards my own successful learning formula. However, as I gained more teaching experience and a broader theoretical knowledge base about adult education, I realized that my initial teaching approach was narrow and unlikely to appeal to the varied learning styles of my students.

As my classroom style evolved, I also found myself better able to build rapport with my students, and more students would come forward to discuss their learning needs

with me. I would feel disheartened to hear from students with learning disabilities that they often choose not to discuss their learning needs because they are afraid of being perceived as different from other students and do not want to be labelled as "disabled." Sometimes I would receive notices from a campus disability center with a list of generic accommodations required for my students but would not feel fully equipped to help them without understanding their challenges and needs better. I also began to wonder to what extent my students were self-aware about how they learn best and how effectively they could articulate their needs to me should they find themselves struggling.

During my sixth year of teaching at the post-secondary level, I enrolled in a college course pertaining to adults with learning disabilities in order to learn more about learning disabilities and accommodating student diversity, and to seek answers to the questions: What is a learning disability and how are students diagnosed with one? Why do some students who are clearly very competent in the classroom struggle to express their knowledge on assessments and receive scores well below their potential in spite of working hard? Are there general changes to my teaching practice that I can make in order to promote success of students with learning disabilities in my class? Completion of this course reassured me about processes that are in place to diagnose and determine appropriate learning accommodations that students with learning disabilities may require. However, at the same time, I was prompted to reflect on past classes and former students, and began to realize just how unaware I had been of their needs.

Statistics Canada reports that the rate of learning limitations in young adults in Canada is approximately 2.5% (2006), while the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) suggests that one in ten Canadians may have a learning disability (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada [LDAC], n.d.). Relating this to my classes and the proportion of students who have approached me to discuss their learning needs (including learning disabilities), suggests that there may be far more students in my classes with "invisible" learning challenges than I may be aware of. Upon investigating whether there are general strategies that I can incorporate into my course delivery to create a more inclusive classroom where all of my students are able to perform at their personal best, I learned about the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and have now begun to weave the principles of UDL into my teaching.

Overview of UDL

UDL is a philosophy that can be applied towards instructional design and course delivery. Application of this philosophy can help to make learning accessible to all learners so that all of our students may have an equal opportunity to succeed (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Rather than placing the burden on our diverse student population to adapt to our teaching style in order to succeed in our courses, as teachers we can instead impart as much flexibility into our course design as possible so that all students may have equal opportunity to perform at their personal best. This essentially is the essence of the UDL philosophy.

The basis of the UDL philosophy is grounded in research into neurological learning networks, which has revealed that learners have varying strengths across different learning networks (Rose & Meyer, 2002). In order to work towards UDL and to reach all of our students, the guidelines of the architectural Universal Design movement (Center

for Universal Design, 1997) can be modified toward Universal Design for Learning. Generally accepted guidelines of UDL include ensuring that the learning environment is supportive; flexibility is provided with respect to how students may receive information, interact with information, and express their knowledge; there is tolerance for error; physical effort required to complete the course is minimized; course design is simple, intuitive, and consistent without unnecessary complexity; instructional materials are accessible to all students; information is explicit and perceptible to all students; and learning spaces are appropriate for intended use (Burgstahler, 2009; Scott, McGuire, & Shaw, 2003; University of Guelph, n.d., and others). While there are suggested guidelines to consider, UDL is not a set of rigid rules to follow, as there are many ways of meeting the guidelines, and the consensus guidelines will likely continue to evolve as discussion continues about how to practically achieve UDL (as described by Edyburn, 2010).

Impact of UDL in the Classroom

Applying a UDL approach to my teaching has a positive impact in my classroom, as it has helped me to put the needs of my learners at the forefront and convey to all students that I am committed to doing my best to aid in their individual success. My perspective has changed from focusing on how to teach the subject, towards focusing on how to teach the students. The UDL guidelines that have had the most substantial impact on transforming my classroom are those related to providing a supportive learning environment and imparting flexibility into course design.

Reflecting on our own positive experiences as learners may highlight the importance of working to develop rapport and a supportive learning environment for our own students. To this end, one technique that I have implemented is to begin the term by sending an email invitation to each student to complete an introductory questionnaire. The questionnaire asks the students to comment on their learning goals, academic strengths and weaknesses, and personal goals. I ask students to provide as much information as they are comfortable sharing. This initiates a one-on-one dialogue with students, intended to demonstrate that they are valued as individuals and that I would like to meet their needs as learners. It is immensely helpful to learn about the learning strengths, weaknesses, and preferences of my students. Some students choose to inform me about learning and/or physical disabilities and give examples of how this affects their learning. This information helps to shape the class sessions as I can take into account the preferences and needs of my students in my lesson plans.

One of the major underlying themes of UDL is to separate learning goals from methods as much as possible (Rose & Meyer, 2002). If we allow students to use multiple methods to reach a particular learning goal, they can choose to express themselves in the manner that best suits them. This flexibility in instructional materials and activities can also aid in motivation, as this allows students to set an appropriate challenge level for themselves. I have applied this theme within a conference model that I have implemented where my students are presenters in a mock conference (Kumar, 2010). I ask students to choose whether they would like to present an oral presentation or a poster presentation about a course topic. Both options are equally academically rigorous and relevant, yet they require the students to challenge themselves in different

ways. For example, students for whom English is not their first language have chosen to give an oral presentation in order to build their confidence with public speaking, while others have indicated that an oral presentation represents a challenge level that is higher than they are comfortable with, and that they are more comfortable with the challenges associated with preparing a poster presentation. This insight from students about how they have made choices in my class suggests that separating class goals from methods is indeed a valuable practice. I also offer students formative feedback on drafts of their presentation materials prior to the conference in order to provide tolerance for error and to guide students along a successful learning process.

Careful consideration of how to use our learning management system (LMS) can also help us to provide more inclusive learning environments and to achieve UDL. I think of my LMS-based course webpage as an additional learning space to accompany a face-to-face class, rather than simply a filing cabinet in which to include information and consider UDL guidelines when designing the webpages. For example, I typically organize information in my LMS in tables where resources are provided as hyperlinks. Content is organized into columns in a single table for each major course component, rather than into various folders that represent layers that students must click through in order to access material. This requires minimal clicking and scrolling to access the materials, thus reducing the amount of physical effort required. I prepare similar tables for all major course topics with the same types of resources organized in the same fashion, in order to present the material in a manner that is simple and consistent, and without unnecessary complexity. In the tables, I provide hyperlinks to materials in various formats, a brief explanation of what each format may be used for (e.g., PDF version for printing), and documents that are compatible with screen reading software in order to ensure that my instructional materials are accessible to all students. Upon polling my students to inquire about which specific resources they have found helpful, I have noted that the responses are highly variable, confirming that it is valuable to include a variety of types of resources to assist student learning.

I have also based choices about my face-to-face classroom style on UDL guidelines, including those that suggest ensuring that information is explicit and perceptible to all students, and that learning spaces are appropriate for intended use. For example, if there is a microphone available I will use it, regardless of whether or not I feel that my voice is carrying well, so that students who may have difficulty hearing do not have to adjust in order to receive information. Further, rather than relying largely on speaking taking place at the front of the room, I now think about alternatives to this. For example, instead of demonstrating a course concept at the front of the room using props, I may ask the students to get involved by handing out props and re-arranging the seating in the room so that students can work with the props in groups as I circulate amongst them. In this manner, the learning space enhances the learning experience, and all students have equal opportunity to receive information.

Conclusions

My teaching experiences suggest that modifications made to course design towards achieving UDL can have a positive impact on my students. By reflecting on my teaching practices to identify where I can make adjustments to increase the flexibility of course

delivery and to convey my support to students, I believe that I am able to make my classroom more accessible and inclusive. This shift towards putting the needs of my students at the forefront of my classroom rather than letting the course content be the dominant presence in my class, has also helped me to develop stronger rapport with my students. Overall, making teaching choices with UDL guidelines in mind has translated to more rewarding classroom experiences for both my students and me. My journey towards creating an inclusive classroom has only just begun, and I expect that my classroom and teaching practices will continue to evolve over time in order to best meet the needs of my diverse students. Reflecting on our teaching practices to consider how we may apply guidelines of UDL into our teaching is a valuable first step towards creating inclusive classrooms.

References

Burgstahler, S. (2009). *Universal design of instruction (UDI): Definition, principles, guidelines, and examples*. Retrieved from http://www.washington.edu/doit/Brochures/Academics/instruction.html

Center for Universal Design. (1997). *The principles of universal design*. Retrieved August 5, 2010 from http://www.ncsu.edu/www/ncsu/design/sod5/cud/about_ud/udprinciplestext.htm

Edyburn, D. L. (2010).Would you recognize universal design for learning if you saw it? Ten propositions for new directions for the second decade of UDL. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, *33*(1), 33-41.

Kumar, K. (2010, June). *Use of a conference model within an introductory science course to accommodate student diversity and to promote student engagement and creativity*. Poster presented at the 30th annual meeting of the Society for Teaching & Learning in Higher Education, Toronto, ON.

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada. (n.d.). *Learning disabilities at a glance*. Retrieved from http://www.ldac-acta.ca/learn-more/ld-basics/learning-disabilities-at-a-glance.html

Rose, D. & Meyer, A. (2002). *Teaching every student in the digital age: Universal design for learning*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Scott, S. S., McGuire, J. M., & Shaw, S. F. (2003). Universal design for instruction: A new paradigm for adult instruction in postsecondary education. *Remedial and Special Education*, *24*, 369-379. doi:10.1177/07419325030240060801

Statistics Canada. (2006). Participation and activity limitation survey 2006: Facts on learning limitations [Data file]. Retrieved from http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-628-x/89-628-x2009014-eng.pdf)

University of Guelph. (n.d.). *Universal instructional design principles at the University of Guelph*. Retrieved from http://www.tss.uoguelph.ca/uid/