

Teaching for Inclusion: Universal Design for Learning

Peggy Rosario

Gwynedd Mercy University

When I transitioned from an administrative position to a faculty role, one of the students in the first class I taught suggested I integrate Universal Design for Learning into my teaching. According to CAST (2023), “Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn” (para. 1). This is accomplished by integrating multiple means of engagement to help students understand the importance of learning something, multiple means of representation to help students understand what they need to learn, and multiple means of expression to enable students to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways.

I teach in an online educational doctorate with a concentration on teaching and learning, and I recognize the importance of modeling best practices for my students so they can implement them in their own teaching. My program uses template courses, which means another faculty member developed my instructional content. However, my student’s suggestion got me intrigued about how I could transform my teaching using UDL to create an inclusive learning environment for my doctoral students.

When I had the opportunity to develop new courses and revise the templates for my courses, the first UDL strategy I integrated was multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2018). I let my students choose the topics of their projects, find articles of interest on the topics we were studying, and share examples of how the course content applied to their lives. The way students could personalize the course content deepened their interest in learning and created important

opportunities for them to learn from each other. My students come into the program with very diverse experiences, and understanding others' perspectives and valuing their contributions deepened their understanding of teaching and learning.

My students' success reinforced my interest in expanding how I integrated UDL into my courses. The next UDL strategy I used to enhance my teaching was multiple means of representation (CAST, 2018). Teaching online asynchronously, my courses traditionally had students reading a text, some articles, and then completing assignments. I realized the instruction was all written and visual. To address this deficit, I actively sought videos and podcasts with captions to add dynamic audio-visual content. I also integrated graphics to illustrate the concepts I was teaching. I sought resources from culturally diverse sources to be more representative of our communities. My goal was to offer students at least two ways to learn each concept I taught. I also used supplemental materials to extend learning so that students could leverage instructional content to deepen their understanding or explore related topics.

I evaluated each course when I taught it to identify what concepts were difficult for students to master. The evidence I used to determine what was challenging included student questions during the course, student performance on assignments, the content of student reflections in their journals in response to the question what was challenging, and feedback in course evaluations. I sought out additional resources to support their understanding, and each time I taught a class, it became richer with diverse instruction I added from identifying these prior deficits. I also created some videos with transcripts that discussed what students had found challenging in the past so that those challenges could be overcome in current classes. I used course announcements for instruction, too. I discussed topics of confusion and shared additional resources. Students often let me know how much they appreciated me supporting their learning in these ways.

The final aspect of UDL that I added to my teaching was multiple forms of expression (CAST, 2018). While my courses tended to have some variety in how students produced evidence of their learning, I realized there was no reason to limit their options for many assignments. For each online discussion and some assignments that were traditionally just written, I added the following directions: “Your submission may be a brief essay, a PowerPoint or Google Slides presentation with speaker notes, an audio file, or a video file. If you choose audio or video options, a transcript is also required.” For my final course projects, I created a list of options that students could choose from and added the option of them creating one of their own. One of my recent students liked using a Padlet, so in the future I will include that in the list of choices.

Another enhancement I integrated into my discussions was holding optional synchronous sessions. Because my courses are asynchronous, and I have students from multiple time zones, I had to select meeting times that worked for most of those interested and record the sessions for those who missed them. Some students never joined the live sessions, but those who came found them to be a very meaningful learning opportunity. Those students who enjoy learning by talking and listening rather than reading found the live sessions particularly helpful. Students also had the option to attend the live sessions and just listen if they felt that was what best helped their learning. I always started the sessions with a “how are you doing” check-in and ended the sessions with the chance to ask questions about the course content or assignments, so students received interpersonal and academic support as part of the synchronous sessions. Other students may have benefitted from viewing the live session recordings.

I found that offering choices in how students communicated their learning enabled them to shine in the way they felt most comfortable. The information each student shared was similar, but the way it was shared helped students better appreciate each other’s talents. Personally, I think creating a PowerPoint with speaker notes is much more challenging than just typing a discussion answer. However, for the students who have strengths in creativity and visualization,

creating PowerPoints is a joyful expression of their learning. They seemed to love doing it, and I believe I can see that in what they produce.

I reinforce the importance of student feedback when I introduce each course because I discuss how prior student feedback informed the enhancements I made to the course they are taking. In my course feedback, students write that my inclusive style helps foster a feeling of belonging, and they can see that I care about their learning as individuals. I strongly believe that UDL is a tool that has helped me accomplish that. The best feedback I get from students is when they tell me that they recognize the positive impact of my UDL approach and that they are fostering it in their own teaching.

References

CAST (2023). *About Universal Design for Learning*. <https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl>

CAST (2018). *Universal Design for Learning guidelines version 2.2*. <http://udlguidelines.cast.org>