

Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

Auspicious Accessibility and Chance Innovation

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Firstly, this essay is *not* about how I accomplished innovative accessibility in my courses. Creating an accessible course is an evolving process where, bit by bit, the course becomes better than it used to be. It is about the journey of *trying, being creative, and challenging oneself to move away from the norm*, arguably the very definition of innovation. This journey began two years ago, when early in the semester one of my students arrived to class after being carried by other students to our room on the third floor. The elevator broke down that day, and due to permanent physical limitations, she could not climb stairs. Later in the semester, these same physical constraints nearly prevented her from turning in the copious amount of assignments on time. I attempted to advocate on her behalf with disability support services, but they were not able to give us much. And lastly, during a break-out exercise in class, she approached me with near tears in her eyes because her group chose to meet in an area of the classroom she could not reach, saying “My group left me behind.”

I never realized how difficult navigating higher education can be for those who suffer from disabilities. And thanks to this courageous student, I became aware of some of the struggles diverse learners face. The following semester I reached out to my student, asking her advice on how to improve accessibility for my courses. She introduced me to Universal Design of Instruction (UDI: Burgstahler, 2015), and its companion, Universal Design for Learning (UDL: CAST, 2018). UDI provides guidelines for improving accessibility across the educational system, including physical and online learning spaces, and in curriculum. More focused on course content, UDL is based in neuroscience research on the diverse ways students learn. The UDL framework suggests instructors provide students with multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression. Both frameworks aim to proactively create accessible products and services accessible to all students, regardless of ability (Bugstahler, 2015).

Reviewing this new-to-me material proved exciting. Never was there to be another student in my course “left behind.” Motivated by what was possible, I was ready to look diversity square in the face and say, “I got this!”

The following year I embarked on incorporating UDI and UDL into all my courses. Although resources abound on techniques and examples for UDI and UDL, instructors like me may soon realize that the process of building accessibility is one of creativity, perseverance, and trial and error. With all the available information on UDI and UDL, I asked myself, did I need to redesign my entire course? If not, which parts were most important? How could I have flexibility with assignments and assessments when rubrics seemed so rigid? And, if I presented course material in a variety of ways as recommended by UDL’s multiple means of representation, would the students perceive this as overkill? I easily became overwhelmed with what I could and should do, so I decided to move towards accessibility in small increments. I began the process with my syllabus. I added a few visual representations, such as a pie graph to represent how many points each assignment contributed to the whole grade. The addition of an accessibility statement near the front of the syllabus proclaimed my efforts to create an accessible learning environment. Before the semester began, I managed to post an introduction video on the LMS, which proved worthwhile when a student approached me saying “Thank you for posting that video. I felt more comfortable coming to class today because I felt like I already knew you.” I also created a confidential information sheet, giving students the opportunity to share learning styles and other information they thought I, as the instructor, should know about them. I reorganized the learning management home page to increase ease of use. And, I went into the classroom early to make sure students had space to move about freely and everyone could easily view the projector screen.

While the initial steps seemed easy, every class thereafter proved a challenge as I struggled to find ways to incorporate UDL. Pushing myself to be more creative with how I was teaching difficult material, one class I came up with the idea to ask students to build a Lego structure illustrating the steps in the research process. Unfortunately, in subsequent classes students scarcely remembered the process better than in years past (this exercise may have been *too* abstract). But, a little later in the semester when I asked students to use skittles to represent sampling in research, they seemed to fair better. Flexibility with assessment proved more of a

challenge, and I struggled to create rubrics that addressed the multiple formats in which students could submit work. Although I struggled, the act of trying felt like an accomplishment.

Here's what I could not do. I could not check all my course readings to ensure they could be accessed in the library system as read-aloud articles. I lacked time to go through each PowerPoint to check for accessibility. I was unable to provide multiple means of engagement with the material each week. In the end, what I could do seemed negligible compared to what I could not do. However, I wrote notes to myself for the next time I taught the course, thinking I might have more opportunities in the future to tackle more areas.

Although UDI and UDL are becoming widely recognized frameworks to create inclusive learning environments, few people in my institution had heard of them, and to my knowledge no one was implementing UDI or UDL in their courses. In my gut I knew what I was doing seemed right, but where was the evidence? Luckily, I had my former student to help process my ideas. She supported me and served as my occasional cheerleader. I believe having someone like her is so important to those who are attempting to innovate. Concerning accessibility, I firmly believe little changes over time make a big difference. I have a long way to go to create a truly accessible classroom. One step at a time, on class at time is all I can do. With perseverance, creativity, and a little trial and error, I can now look diversity square in the face and say, "I'm trying."

References

- Burgstahler, S. E. (Ed.) (2015). *Universal Design in higher education: From principles to practice*. (2nd ed.). Cambridge, MS: Harvard Education Press.
- CAST (2018). *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2*. Retrieved from <http://udlguidelines.cast.org>