

Developing a systematic whole School approach to inclusive practice through Universal Design for Learning

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Anniversaries provide a useful juncture to cast a critically reflective eye on journeys travelled. With this in mind, just over a year has passed since the University of Worcester college minibus began its early morning sojourn heading some 100 km northeast with a destination of De Montfort University (DMU) in Leicester. There were eight colleagues aboard who came from a diversity of discipline schools along with several student services representatives. The shared aim among

the wayfarers was to discover more about how the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework could respond to the learning requirements of an increasingly diverse student body at our University. DMU has been particularly successful in developing a whole organisational approach to UDL as a means of ensuring inclusive practice. Such was the national interest in the implementation of the UDL framework that representatives from around 20 other universities also attended

the information seminar.

The desire among colleagues at the University of Worcester to enrich their understanding of UDL initiatives in Higher Education had emerged from an earlier national conference hosted at the University in June of 2017. This event had showcased how systematic whole organisational approaches to inclusive practice might be designed and implemented. Building on the

Department for Education report entitled 'Inclusive teaching and learning in higher education as a route to excellence' (DfE, 2017), it was clear that UDL was emerging as a powerful conceptual framework to underpin positive change processes. A critical attribute of this framework is that it provides scope to unify planning among differing strands of the student HE experience, including student services, library and information services, estates, information technologies, and the wider academy. Thus UDL has potential to act systemically and strategically to ensure the learning requirements of the vast majority of students have been addressed through anticipatory design. Increasingly, international research illustrates that UDL can transform educational provision through a framework that uses multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation and multiple means of expression (see for example, the work of: Burgstahler, 2013; Cook and Rao, 2018; Gomez, 2015; Rao *et al.*, 2015).

So, what has changed since that journey of learning began over a year ago? A recent audit of inclusive practice within the School for Education revealed that a strong community of professional practitioners has emerged within the School, with UDL acting as its wellspring of inspiration for pedagogical design and practice. Perhaps the greatest exemplification of this community is through its online Yammer network. Colleagues within the Department for Children and Families coordinate a dynamic Yammer group, which shares best practice around the UDL.

Additionally, within and beyond this department, UDL principles have inspired colleagues to seek out ways in which accessible technologies can meet the learning requirements of all learners, especially those who traditionally have been marginalised. With the support of Library and Information Services, a formative research project is being developed to investigate how the use of audio books may support a diversity of learners including those with visual impairments, those who come from first generation backgrounds and other learners who may benefit from access to audio learning. Increasingly, accessibility apps have been built into the Talis reading resource lists thereby enabling students with dyslexia to access and use a

diversity of digital colour overlays.

Colleagues in the Department are using UDL as a systematic approach to inform the revalidation of all courses. Collaborative planning has ensured that colleagues have agreed to adopt a similar template for all course Blackboard VLE formats, thus adding coherence and quality to the student experience. In a similar way, the team responsible for the PGC in Secondary Education have also focused on the development of consistent, accessible design in the use of VLE learning and teaching platforms so that students can navigate their way around, and interface productively with, tools that can enhance the learning experience. To further complement this work, the team has piloted the early release of learning materials so that all students can access and engage with critical content prior to the scheduled lecture periods. Other technological learning tools such as Pebblepad portfolios have also been reconfigured to include some UDL principles.

Meanwhile, colleagues from the Department for Education and Inclusion along with colleagues in the Primary Education Department are collaborating on the use of Lesson Study to promote a collegiate form of peer-supported professional development that reviews and strengthens implementation of the University's 'Policy and procedures on inclusive assessment' (University of Worcester, 2016). The research project is particularly mindful of the multiple means of expression strand within UDL; this encourages educators to design a diversity of ways in which assessment as and for learning can be evidenced. This small-scale British Academy funded research project is also purposefully focused on anticipating student variability in learning and assessment requirements, thereby ensuring that assessment processes purposefully tackle inequities in outcomes through a research-informed socially just perspective (Hanesworth *et al.*, 2018).

UDL also provides a conceptual framework to chart a reflexive review of practices in postgraduate courses. As the MA Education suite of modules and the overarching programme are undergoing review, there is scope to identify and learn from and adapt inclusive design strategies being adopted at the undergraduate level, for example

by incorporating a diversity of assessment modalities that reaches beyond the 'one size fits all' traditional approach to curriculum design. Significantly, the UDL framework now constitutes part of the first module on the PG Cert HETL, so that there is potential for a shared understanding of the ways in which UDL can complement learning for all students.

In order to ensure wider take-up and greater sustainability of this model of inclusive change management, colleagues who wish to update modules and courses within the School of Education are urged by leaders responsible for course quality to reflect on the ways in which they may be made more accessible through consideration of the UDL framework (CAST, 2018). Ultimately, as shared by Hanesworth *et al.* (2018, p. 10), an ever-increasing emphasis on shared collegiate understandings of what constitutes UDL-informed inclusivity may be best actualised when four dynamically interacting dimensions of change management are brought together – these include:

- 1) Setting of an organisational vision for inclusive curriculum and assessment design. This would involve clearly articulating the ways in which strategic leaders encourage novel learning and teaching perspectives
- 2) Developing avenues and mechanisms for all educators and student service providers to encourage a collaborative, partnership-based approach, especially by seeking to include the voices of students and staff who have been marginalised;
- 3) Investing in the resources of: time, technological hardware and software for staff and students and ensuring there is professional development capacity to engage effectively with curriculum and assessment change processes
- 4) Through praxis, extending the culture of change to incorporate exemplified minimum standards and best practices for inclusive, socially just curriculum and assessment design both within and external to the institution. For example, by informing and involving external examiners of the positive implications for UDL on student learning outcomes, thereby impacting more widely on external cultures of HE praxis.

A useful way to reflect upon, and to further develop, the initiatives shared earlier would be to illustrate how colleagues can extend and strengthen their UDL planning and practices by considering the interplay between the attributes of inclusive change management as outlined above. Such an approach would enable exemplification and prioritisation of next steps and would further enable planning ownership among course teams and their students. A sample of such a dynamic planning framework is provided in Table 1.

<i>Universal Design for Learning Features</i>	<i>Organisational vision and strategic leadership</i>	<i>Developing shared approaches</i>	<i>Resources and professional development</i>	<i>Extending the culture of change</i>
<i>Multiple means of engagement</i>	<p>Identification of strategic UDL champions in senior leadership.</p> <p>Top down and bottom up synergies: including students and middle leaders.</p> <p>Formation of inclusive curriculum and assessment policies based on principles of social justice.</p>	<p>Collaborating to articulate a strategic vision for inclusivity that recognises systemic nature of inequalities.</p> <p>All stages of course development and implementation incorporate reflection using the UDL framework.</p> <p>Collaborative formative development of exemplification of how UDL operates in praxis.</p>	<p>Guidance and guidelines for establishing minimum standards of inclusive anticipatory design.</p> <p>Use of joint practice development to enhance sustainability of UDL.</p> <p>Course leadership and recognition programmes incorporate aspects of UDL.</p> <p>Targeted action research and reflexive praxis.</p>	<p>Inclusion of accessibility literacy into all programmes.</p> <p>Choice and diversity of assessment processes.</p> <p>Revalidation processes apply inclusive UDL consideration.</p>
<i>Multiple means of representation – how do we disseminate?</i>	<p>Involve students' unions in defining what a UDL approach to HE pedagogy might look like.</p> <p>Ensure Learning/Teaching and Quality Coordinators are UDL champions.</p> <p>Engagement with external expertise in the field of UDL.</p>	<p>Investment in accessible technologies for student use, for example, use of formative online assessments.</p> <p>Consideration of how inclusive assessment is facilitated through pedagogical accessibility, for example lecture capture and notes in advance.</p>	<p>Incorporation of unconscious bias professional development.</p> <p>Including multiple identities in pedagogies and assessment.</p> <p>Providing scope for personal academic tutors to strengthen assessment literacy.</p> <p>Including accessible and enabling technologies as a key focus for CPD.</p> <p>Providing insights into how peers have developed consistency in VLE format and content for all learners.</p>	<p>Establishing communities of practice to collaborate on driving change for a social justice approach to assessment and feedback.</p> <p>Developing toolkits and flowcharts to illustrate inclusive assessment policies and processes.</p> <p>Internal and external facing websites hosting all policies and practices.</p>
<i>Multiple means of action and expression – what do we do to embed?</i>	<p>Formation of key strategic action groups, for example BAME assessment, achievement and retention, with student leadership.</p> <p>Identification of inclusive assessment and pedagogy as priority area in strategic planning.</p> <p>Recognition and rewards for inclusive assessment and pedagogies.</p>	<p>Consistent checking of formative learning through interactive assessments (in action).</p> <p>Providing online and hard copy case studies of how inclusive assessment policies have been realised in practice.</p> <p>Sharing of key strategic decisions beyond working groups through blogs and accessibility of minutes.</p>	<p>Encouraging targeted research to investigate the impacts of differing strategies at course and module level.</p> <p>Consistent checking with diverse student body.</p> <p>Using attainment data for marginalised groups as the basis for CPD and action.</p> <p>Applying concepts from Dis/ability Critical Race Studies to explore student narratives of empowerment and marginalisation.</p>	<p>Developing systems and processes to ensure that UDL features on annual enhancement plans.</p> <p>Collaborative contributions to research to strengthen internal culture and inform external practices.</p> <p>Engage external examiners with new assessment and feedback policies and practices that embed equality and diversity.</p>

Table 1 UDL dynamic planning framework

Conclusion

The UDL framework is increasingly being recognised by HEI practitioners as providing a well-researched and meaningful conceptual framework for enabling joint meaning-making among students, support staff and academics in order to address inequities in learning outcomes. What is promising is that the comprehensive nature of the resultant pedagogical strategies engenders student autonomy, so students become 'purposeful and motivated, resourceful and knowledgeable, strategic and goal oriented' (CAST, 2018).

At the same time, the framework architects were keenly aware of wider systematic organisational and societal biases and prejudices that can militate against all students realising their true potential. The UDL framework encourages practitioners to become more aware of how these challenges to success operate at a strategic and practical level as students learn. In becoming ever increasingly aware of

how to equip marginalised students with the knowledge, skills and capacities to overcome these challenges, the framework provides a tool for pedagogical hope and success.

References

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