ACCESS to Postsecondary Education through Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning: A Concise Introduction

Introduction

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a set of principles that guide the design of inclusive classroom instruction and accessible course materials. UDL's three principles are: 1) *multiple methods of representation* that give learners a variety of ways to acquire information and build knowledge; 2) *multiple means of student action and expression* that provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they have learned; and 3) *multiple modes of student engagement* that tap into learners' interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2011c).

Historical Development

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) traces its origin to the Universal Design (UD) movement of the 1990's. The term "universal design" was coined by architect and designer Ron Mace at the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University (Burgstahler, 2008; Center for Applied Special Technology, 2011b). Mace and his colleagues defined UD as "the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2011a).

Foundational Concepts

Following passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), UD became popular with the architects and designers who labored to make public buildings and city streets accessible for the first time in American history. Three critical insights that emerged from the work of that period have come to define Universal Design:

1. Most retrofitting and "adaptation" could have been avoided if designers had planned for accessibility from the beginning. Mace suggested a design ideal in which the needs of a diverse audience should be *anticipated*. Thus, a chief characteristic of Universal Design

is that it "proactively builds in features to accommodate the range of human diversity" (McGuire, Scott, & Shaw, 2006, p. 173).

2. Modifications to the built environment—automatic door openers, curb cuts, entry ramps, universal-height drinking fountains, and others—are beneficial to many people, not just those with disabilities. Indeed, people today routinely use door openers to enter a building when their hands are full, just as skateboarders use curb cuts and children visiting the hospital can drink water from a fountain without assistance. Similarly, commuters in noisy airports and students in quiet libraries rely equally on TV closed captioning. Each of these conveniences was originally conceived as a disability accommodation.

3. Disabilities have less to do with individual deficits—what some people can't do that others can—and more to do with environmental barriers that obstruct people's ability to function effectively and participate fully in society (United Nations, 2006 - Preamble E). Universal Design helps level the playing field by removing unnecessary barriers.

From UD to UDL

In recent years, the UD philosophy has found fertile ground in the field of education. Elementary school teachers and university professors alike have adopted UD "as a conceptual and philosophical foundation on which to build a model of teaching and learning that is inclusive, equitable, and guides the creation of accessible course materials" (Schelly, Davies, & Spooner, 2011, p. 18).

If the goal of UD is the removal of barriers from the physical environment, the goal of UDL is the elimination barriers from the learning environment. As David Rose, one of UDL's founders, has stated, "UDL puts the tag 'disabled' where it belongs—on the curriculum, not the learner. The curriculum is disabled when it does not meet the needs of diverse learners" (Council for Exceptional Children, 2011).

"Universal" benefits

The obstacles faced by students with disabilities (for example, study materials that are not in electronic formats, uncaptioned video, PDF files that do not contain any real text and therefore cannot be searched or read aloud by text-to-speech software) are often the same obstacles encountered by students who possess different learning styles, use the latest computer technologies, or whose native language is not English. UDL benefits many students—hence the "universal" in Universal Design for Learning.

UDL is about providing options. In the words of David Gordon, a director at the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), "Options are essential to learning, because no single way of presenting information, no single way of responding to information, and no single way of engaging students will work across the diversity of students that populate our classrooms. Alternatives reduce barriers to learning for students with disabilities while enhancing learning opportunities for everyone" (Council for Exceptional Children, 2011).

UDL does not advocate any single teaching practice; rather, it combines today's best approaches for engaging students and challenging them to think critically. It helps instructors meet the learning needs of a diverse student body through a combination of instructional modalities, formats, and technologies. To many people, UDL is simply good teaching! (Ohio State Partnership Grant, 2011)

References

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