

THRIVING *in* Academe

REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson (drobert@fiu.edu) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Flannery (mflannery@nea.org) at NEA.

Accidental UDL: A Silver Lining of the COVID Pandemic

One positive aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on higher education has been the phenomenon of "accidental" adoption of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) practices. Moving forward, faculty can intentionally and proactively incorporate new technologies, assessment options, and effective learning strategies into their course design to enhance accessibility and student success.

BY KIRSTEN BEHLING
Tufts University

KATE PILLETTE
Tufts University

LISA BIBEAU
Salem State University

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic required urgent flexibility. As faculty quickly moved into an intentional course redesign for hybrid and remote learning in the spring 2020 semester, they naturally and inevitably put principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into practice, particularly preemptive flexibility, iterative design, and anticipation of variability among learners and learning environments. Among the many harmful impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic to higher education, one positive effect was this phenomenon of "accidental" adoption of UDL practices.

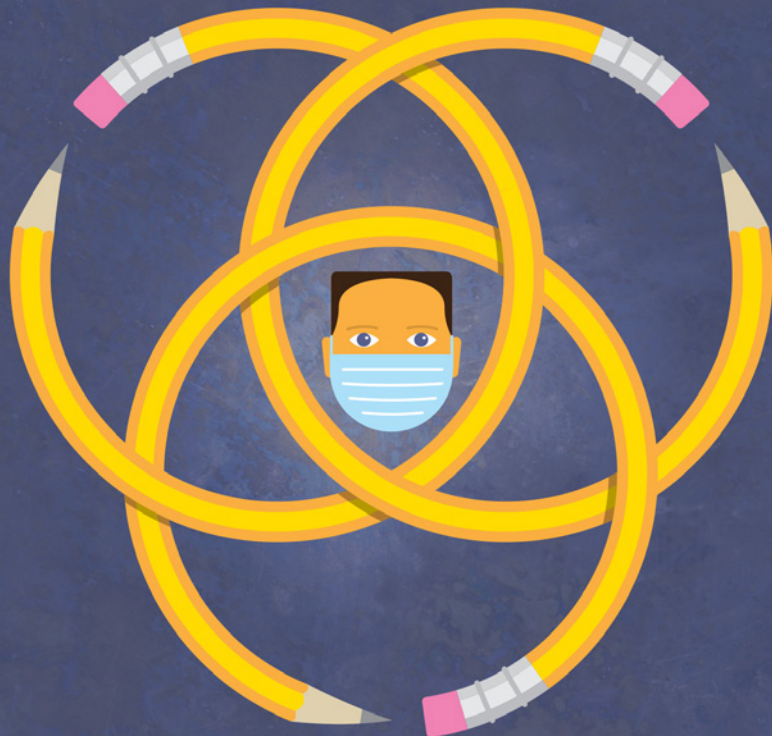
Building on the accidental UDL practices that they adopted and implemented last fall, faculty now have the momentum and wherewithal to use UDL strategies intentionally for increasing the learning potential in their courses. Faculty's ability to implement these strategies with time to

plan and prepare suggests a higher likelihood of long-term effective and diverse teaching practices.

UDL is the result of neuroscience research on how students learn. Scientists found that each individual learner calls upon their own experiences, strengths, and approaches to learning that cannot simply be taught through one instructional style. The researchers went further to categorize them into the three principles of UDL (Basham, Blackorby, & Marino, 2020; Rao et al., 2015).

1. Multiple means of engagement
2. Multiple means of representation
3. Multiple means of action and expression

Existing research into applications of UDL in higher education settings demonstrates that



Furthermore, as proven by the 170 responses from the second phase survey, faculty continued their use of the “accidental” UDL strategies throughout the 2020 – 2021 academic year.

Multiple Means of Engagement

Faculty expressed concerns for students’ sense of connectedness and well-being, not only in the context of the classroom, but also in a broader sense of connection to the campus community and support networks during a time of great uncertainty on a national and global scale. These efforts and concerns tap into the third UDL principle: “multiple means of engagement,” or the “why” of learning. Faculty faced a unique challenge not only to make their course remain relevant during a global health crisis, but also to keep students interested and motivated in a remote and sometimes asynchronous learning environment.

Faculty responded to a general concern of engagement by adjusting class length, content, and participation requirements in the online environment. Use of LMS and video conferencing features allowed faculty to integrate multiple means of engagement in their efforts to keep students motivated in their remote courses. Faculty also sought to support students’ emotional learning

UDL principles can successfully be incorporated into course design, that remote learning and technology is a great facilitator of these principles, and that faculty generally appreciate the principles of UDL, though they may not have formal training or explicit knowledge of said principles.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors conducted a two-phase research study at their institutions. Our goal was to measure

what new strategies faculty used as they transitioned modalities, the impact of those strategies, and finally whether or not they would continue to use them in future semesters. We received over 150 survey responses from faculty teaching at a private four-year institution and a state four-year institution. Our theory that faculty accidentally adopted the principles of UDL to create universally accessible courses for all their students was proven to be true.

TALES FROM REAL LIFE: STUDENT & FACULTY REACTIONS TO ACCIDENTAL UDL

Students’ positive experiences with course redesign, as reported by faculty, were changes that aligned with UDL principles. Students appreciated varied options for engagement, multiple means of accessed course information and content, and flexibility with assignments. Students’ negative experiences, as reported by faculty, were a result of sudden and sweeping changes made during a time of crisis. Stu-

dents had to acclimate to new technologies, emotional challenges, and changes to their workload and assessment types. In a calmer and more predictable environment, these changes would not need to be so challenging. If faculty intentionally and proactively incorporated new technologies, assessment options, and effective learning strategies into their course design, students could better benefit from such changes. As one faculty

member responded in the survey,

“I realize that my online courses in the spring lacked a lot of welcoming details that encourage student engagement. I have worked very hard this summer to ensure that my online courses this fall include much more encouragement and opportunity for student participation and engagement.”

When reflecting on the positive and negative outcomes of their

experience during the shift to remote learning, faculty appreciated the opportunity to make changes and try new methods of instruction, engagement, and assessment. Higher education is a notoriously stagnant setting for pedagogy; the opportunity for sweeping changes to course design, materials, and assessment only comes about in a crisis. Faculty felt this opportunity to reflect and re-design was a silver lining during an otherwise challeng-

ing and volatile time.

“It forces you to be much more organized and really intentional about how your students engage and what the purpose is for the activities.”

“I feel that this is an incredible opportunity for us all to redesign and make choices for best practices and sensitivity to the wide range of needs in our students.”

BEST PRACTICES: LOOKING AHEAD TO FALL 2021

How can faculty build on “accidental UDL” and adopt UDL-aligned strategies going forward? Here are some faculty endorsed strategies.

Multiple Means of Engagement

- In addition to changing the modality in which you engage students, consider re-prioritizing engagement, and offer more frequent and flexible options to ensure all students have access to engagement as part of the learning process.

- Consider reducing the length and frequency of class meetings in favor of increased opportunities for group work, office hours or individual check-ins. If reducing class time isn't possible, devote more of that time to interactive discussion than to content delivery.

Multiple Means of Representation

- Rather than use your LMS as a repository for class materials, thoughtfully embed and organize content to facilitate students' learning

and choice of materials.

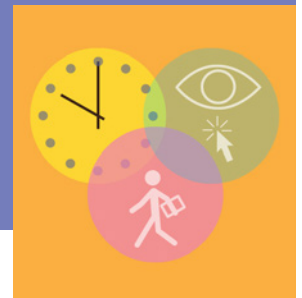
- Incorporate more asynchronous, pre-lecture materials, visual tools, and recordings of live lectures.
- Flip your classroom and make course content more concise to emphasize discussion, engagement, and interactive learning and demonstrations.

Multiple Means of Action/Expression

- Provide more accommodations for students' individual

circumstances and conflicts such as flexible deadlines and attendance policies.

- Allow students to self-pace their work when appropriate.
- Embrace take-home assessments and non-traditional assessments, such as portfolios and presentations instead of exams.



needs by clearly communicating expectations and offering frequent contact via office hours and emails.

Importantly, faculty believed that their biggest impact on student success was when asked what measure faculty believed were most effective for students, their open responses largely centered on issues of engagement. Effective strategies included “spending a few minutes at the beginning of each class, checking in to see how people were doing” and “willingness to meet with students individually.” Another faculty member made a poignant note: “During class on Zoom, I was able to see each student's face and they were able to see each student's face. Because of my own visual impairments, I was able to see their facial expression more accurately and they might have been able to see a close up of mine.” Another survey respondent nicely summarized: “My flexibility and responsiveness to their needs and emotional well-being” was the aspect of their course that was most beneficial to students.

Multiple Means of Representation

During a rapid course re-design for the online world, faculty explored presenting information and content in a variety of different ways; this aligns with the UDL principle “multiple means of

representation,” or the “what” of the learning process. By presenting course content in a variety of ways — including synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid modalities — students were able to access information in the way that worked best for them. One of the most common areas that faculty reported multiple means of representation was adjustments to the syllabus and course content itself. One faculty

**EACH LEARNER CALLS
UPON THEIR OWN
EXPERIENCES,
STRENGTHS, AND
APPROACHES TO
LEARNING THAT
CANNOT SIMPLY BE
TAUGHT THROUGH ONE
INSTRUCTIONAL STYLE.**

member reported, “[the transition to remote instruction] forces you to be much more organized and really intentional about how your students engage and what the purpose is for the activities.”

Faculty utilized pre-recorded lectures, YouTube videos, discussion boards, small group discussions, flipped classrooms, and other methods of conveying content that

were previously less common for in-person instruction. These changes also caused faculty to think about communication and how students would understand the new expectations. As one faculty member reflected, “The moving from in-class to online made me realize the importance of spelling out the underlying purposes of everything I do in class. It also taught me how to present the course highly modularized [sic] so that it can be delivered in a ‘put down and come back later’ mode.” Overall, providing course content in multiple ways became important for the faculty to consider when managing a new course design, and this is reflected in the principle of multiple means of representation.

Multiple Means of Action and Expression

When asked to reflect on which course changes they were most likely to keep in their course design going forward, faculty cited changes to assessment procedures:

“I've moved due dates but no penalty for late work.”

“I've changed my grading scale so I don't use a 0 anymore.”

“I am rethinking the need for a final exam (something I was already thinking about before).”

“[I will] give students the opportunity to self-select the topic for their own presentation.”

“Take-home assessments could be incorporated more.”

These processes align clearly with the UDL principle “multiple means of action and expression,” or the “how” of learning. By providing new or varied options for assessments, faculty allowed more opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning. This practice encourages each student to show the full extent of their knowledge, in the way that works best for them.

Additionally, the provision of new or extended deadlines for assignments and assessments supported students’ emotional needs in a time of much uncertainty. This flexibility allowed students to demonstrate their knowledge in a timeframe that allowed for emotional regulation, decreased environmental stressors, and truly engaged learning. By allowing students more autonomy over deadlines, faculty ensured students were appropriately challenged by the content of the assignment, rather than the extraneous challenges of time zone differences, responsibilities in the home, or even self-care during a turbulent time.

Despite the whirlwind Spring 2020 semester, new UDL strategies for course design, instruction and assessment emerged (though some may argue accidentally) and were carried into the 2020 – 2021 academic year. Faculty now have a sizable

toolbox of UDL strategies (designed by faculty for faculty) to utilize moving forward, including increasing flexibility in course design and enhancing students’ opportunities to engage with the class express what they have learned. These tools — aligned with the three principles of UDL — can be used individually or in combination to create more accessible, more effective learning environments for our students.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Basham, J.D., Blackorby, J., Marino, M.T. (2020). Opportunity in Crisis: the Role of Universal Design for Learning in Educational Re-design. *Learning Disabilities: A Contemporary Journal*, 18(1), 71-91.

CAST (2018). Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2. Retrieved from <http://udlguidelines.cast.org>

North Carolina State University Center for Universal Design. (1997). “Principles of Universal Design” Retrieved from https://projects.ncsu.edu/ncsu/design/cud/about_ud/udprinciples.htm

Rao, K., Edelen-Smith, P., & Wailehua, C. (2015). Universal design for online courses: applying principles to pedagogy. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 30(1), 35-52.

Silver, P., Bourke, A., & Strehorn, K.C. (1998). Universal Instructional Design in Higher Education: An Approach for Inclusion, Equity & Excellence, 31(2), 47-51.

Meet Kirsten Behling, Kate Pillette, and Lisa Bibeau



Kirsten Behling is the associate dean of the StAAR Center at Tufts University and a founder and professor in the Disability Services in

Higher Education Graduate Certificate Program at Suffolk University. Behling is co-author of *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education* (West Virginia University Press, 2018).



Kate Pillette is the school psychology and learning specialist at Tufts University. She works to support students, educators, and systems in creative inclusive, accessible learning environments.



Lisa Bibeau is an assistant dean at Salem State University and an adjunct professor at Salem State University. She is responsible for ensuring curricular access to all students while managing access to programs provided to the public.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER: STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

At the heart of UDL is the goal to increase access to the broadest range of users as possible. That includes students with disabilities. Students with disabilities must ask for accommodations in higher education; accommodations are not automatically provided in college like they may be in high school. And even if students ask, they are not guaranteed the accommodations that they request. The need to ask for support and the uncertainty around receiving that support causes many students go unaccommodated in their first year. As seasoned disability service professionals, we have seen this approach to their education cause academic hardship for students in their first semester and ultimately lead to frustration and disappointment with the collegiate experience.

Many of the UDL strategies that we saw accidentally used this past year and a half have the ability to eliminate or drastically reduce the need for accommodations for students with disabilities. Simple things like using closed captioning, posting PowerPoint slides and handouts on a course website, checking PDF documents to make sure that they are accessible before distributing, and giving greater flexibility in how a student participates in class, will create an environment that is inclusive and welcoming to all, including students with disabilities.

