

# UDL Beyond the classroom – A UDL Audit of Disability Service Provision

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### Abstract:

*This paper will discuss the potential of the theoretical framework of Universal Design for Learning to be applied to post-secondary education environments beyond the classroom, in the form of a UDL Audit.*

**Keywords:** Universal Design for Learning, Social Model of Disability, UDL audit, barriers

### INTRODUCTION: UNEXPLORED POTENTIAL – UDL BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Universal Design for Learning is defined by the Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST) as a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn. UDL has become a common, widely used framework within higher education institutions to increase cognitive access to learning environments through the creation of curricula, materials and assessments that offer equal learning opportunities for a diverse student population (CAST).

Almost all of the work of disability professionals and teaching services on higher education campuses in the United States and Canada are focused on the promotion of UDL with faculty. The efforts are centered on the provision of resources and professional development opportunities to support the implementation of UDL principles in classrooms.

The main objective of UDL remains the transformation of the learning environment (Gabel, 2010). The notion that UDL has an inherent potential to be applied to environments outside the classroom is clearly expressed in Sheryl Burgstahler's article on Universal Design for Student Services (Anderson A., et al., 2008). Although Universal Design, which focuses on the design of the physical environment, has been extensively applied in all types of environments such as libraries, universities, public amenities etc., the literature is slight on the practical application of the principles of UDL to settings other than classroom environments (Roberts, 2010; Staines, 2012). Theoretical frameworks, in practical application, are often too narrow in scope. There is an inherent danger of overlooking the impact that theoretical frameworks may have on other areas. What sense does it make to create inclusive UDL classrooms, if other services provided by post-secondary institutions such as DS offices, student services and academic advising are still constructing barriers? Therefore, the Office for Students with Disabilities at McGill Uni-

versity decided to implement the principles of UDL in its own service provision to students in the form of a UDL audit.

### WHAT IS A UDL AUDIT OF SERVICE PROVISION?

It is important to acknowledge that the UDL audit did not follow a specific list of items or areas of examination, nor did it follow standardized regulations. No checklist was created and there was no audit form to serve as a common point of reference. The UDL audit was performed by all staff members in their respective professional areas. The staff in McGill University's Office for Student Services is comprised of the Director, two access advisers, one learning resources adviser, one secretary, two technologists and two administrative coordinators. Each staff member started with assessing and reflecting on their daily practices to identify barriers. The ultimate goal was to remove unnecessary barriers and widen access.

The concept of the UDL audit is based on the key notion that the theoretical framework of Universal Design for Learning is the procedural translation and application of the social model of disability. The key idea of this model is that disability is a result of societal, cultural, attitudinal and physical barriers that exist in the environment. Barriers can occur whenever an individual interacts with an inaccessible environment (Barnes & Mercer, 2003). Societal and cultural practices and structures which can create barriers include institutional and departmental policies and procedures, such as marketing materials, mission statements and discourse. This environmental, barrier-focused approach shifts the responsibility for creating an inclusive campus community to university employees, and empowers them to design environments, practices, and policies, which widen access (Gabel, 2010).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a theoretical framework providing three principles to help educators and staff to identify and reduce barriers: *Multiple Means of Representation*, *Multiple Means of Engagement*, and *Multiple Means of Action and Expression*. The goal of UDL is to create barrier-free environments from the outset (Burgstahler, 2008). The goal of the UDL audit was, therefore, to create barrier-free, accessible and inclusive services and resources for students, and to align the unit's external messages related to access, with its internal practices of creating inclusivity.

## Identification of Barriers and the Implementation of UDL

The first step of a UDL audit is to conduct an analysis to identify barriers that exist within current practices of service delivery to students. In order to widen access, this analysis is followed by the removal of the identified barriers through a UDL-based conception of services. This implies that services and procedures need to be reframed and redesigned from the beginning rather than fixing existing structures. The following areas were identified as essential components of the office's everyday interaction with students and were subject to analysis: (1) user interface (2) discourse in the initial interview (3) development of faculty resources (4) outreach and marketing.

### *UDL Audit Areas*

Analysis and the removal of barriers were carried out by the staff members working in the office. Participants were empowered to reflect on their daily practices, to identify barriers and to modify their professional practices and procedures according to the principles of UDL to create an inclusive environment. The UDL audit was not standardized or structured in any way, other than the four areas outlined above.

### *User Interface:*

User interface, i.e., the different ways in which we interact with students to provide them with information or to receive information from them, is an important area of focus. It quickly became apparent that students were often required to communicate with us in print. Registration for exams and workshops were done exclusively on paper. Print-based communication creates barriers for students with visual impairments and learning disabilities. The system also required students to come into the office to pick-up and submit registration forms. Considering the first principle of UDL, Multiple Means of Representation, we removed this barrier by transferring all paper forms to a web-based forum. All registration forms are now available online and accessible by screen readers and a variety of adaptive software. Removing barriers related to cognitive access had the additional benefit of reducing barriers related to physical access. Students are no longer required to visit the office. They can access and submit their forms from almost everywhere.

The requirement to register to take final exams in our office was completely removed, though unavoidable administrative procedures still require students to register for mid-term exams. After the implementation of this new procedure, the volume of final exams taken in the office immediately jumped from 1,096 to 1,632. The level of no-shows remained almost identical. It can be concluded, therefore, that the traditional exam registration process must have created barriers to students in need of exam accommodations.

The analysis related to the student user interface was also extended to the practical setting and format of advising

sessions. Why should students be forced to visit the office to meet with an adviser, face to face? Physical visits to the office might create barriers for students with physical impairments but may also create barriers for students with mental health problems. Being in a one-on-one advising situation might create anxiety for some students, while the need to take public transport in order to come to the office may create barriers for students with psycho-social problems. The office therefore decided to routinely offer virtual registration and advising appointments via Skype, offering students multiple ways to engage with an adviser. More than 15% of students now regularly communicate with the office using Skype.

The application of UDL's first and second principles of offering Multiple Means of Representation and Engagement, respectively, has led to a considerable reduction of barriers and clearly widened user access to our services.

### *Initial Meeting and Documentation Guidelines:*

Use of language and terminology, as well as attitudes charged with labels and stereotypes rooted in the medical model of disability, often constitute symbolic barriers for students. We identified barriers attributable to reliance on a medical model of disability influencing our office's discourse, use of language, and appointment protocol. We reviewed and abandoned the use of terminology and diagnostic labels, such as *intake*, *help* and *problem*, which, according to Barnes and Mercer (2003), clearly mirror a medical model approach and focus on the student as the problem rather than the environment. For example, intake is now called *first appointment*. Instead of talking about problems and help, the dialogue between advisers and students now center on barriers students experience in their educational environment. All staff receive training on the social model of disability, UDL, the concept of *Power, and Privilege and Ableism*, and related terminology. Our new terminology reflects the social model of disability. It is striking to observe how the attitudes and the understanding of professional roles in our office, has shifted as a consequence of this (Titchkosky, 2009).

An access adviser focuses on student access needs, and works to remove barriers in the environment, not on changing students to fit the normalizing standards of our educational systems. Language and terminology on the office's website was redesigned as well, to fully embrace the social model of disability. Instead of talking about students with disabilities and accommodations, the website now addresses barriers and the implementation of UDL to create accessible learning environments for diverse learners. Terms such as *inclusive learning environments*, *equal opportunities* and *diverse learners* integrate the concept of UDL into our office's mission and values.

If the focus is on the environment and not on the student, does it still make sense to ask students to prove their disability status in order to have access to advisers? The obvious answer is no. Students are no longer asked to provide

medical documentation before they meet with an adviser, and all students are welcome to discuss barriers with an access adviser. The individual experience of the student drives the discussion. Potential solutions focus on making changes to the learning environment. For example, recommendations are often made to course instructors, suggesting UDL tools to widen student access to the curriculum.

We believe the new terminology and perspective that revolves around reducing barriers, improving access, and using UDL as a tool to create equal learning opportunities for all students, will influence and transform the persisting medical model in higher education discourse. We welcome a new model based on concepts of inclusion, access and social justice.

#### *Faculty Resources and Professional Development:*

If the goal is to change discourse and design learning environments that are accessible and flexible enough to accommodate a diverse body of users in higher education, then resources need to be offered to faculty and other university units on our campus to learn about the social model of disability and UDL. As an initial transition effort, 50% of advisor hours are being redeployed for the promotion of UDL on our campus. This has led to the development of workshops for faculty, students, and staff members that raise awareness and challenge common societal and cultural views, structures, and norms that produce ableism, stereotypes and oppression (Bell, 2007). UDL is a core component of these workshops, delivered in a UDL format to serve as a model for course instructors and staff members.

In addition to workshops, the office website provides its own Faculty Resource page, including videos, research articles and other informational material about UDL as well as the social model of disability. The professional development and website content were developed according to the two principles of UDL that provide multiple means of representation and give interested individuals the opportunity to engage with the material in their preferred way of learning (e.g., offering a wide range of possibilities such as online videos, one-on-one tutorials, group workshops, individualized consultations and articles in electronic-format).

#### *Outreach and Marketing Materials:*

Barriers can also be created through public relations and marketing. The notion of learner diversity as opposed to individual disabilities lays the foundation for the theoretical framework of Universal Design for Learning. This notion is based on neuroscience and has at its core the understanding that all individuals are different in the way they learn, interact, and engage with their environment. Therefore, UDL benefits all students, including students with disabilities.

As a result of adapting the UDL framework and applying it to service provision, it seemed no longer appropriate to

target our office's outreach toward a specific user base defined by narrow diagnostic labels. If it's the environment that disables students, there can be no clearly defined user base. Disability moves on a continuum, depending on the potential barriers that a student may or may not encounter. We developed a new outreach campaign, focusing on the identification of common barriers that students might experience in their campus environment, and not on individual student characteristics. The ultimate outcome was a marketing and rebranding exercise which led our office to change its name from Office for Students with Disabilities to myAccess. The new name reflects the underlying principle of UDL and the social model of disability. The environment creates disabling situations. We have to design them to be accessible and inclusive from the outset, to provide students with equal opportunities to learn and interact with society on all levels.

#### **WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?**

The UDL audit we designed has led to a transformation of practices in all four of the essential component areas we identified as part of our office's routine interaction with students. The most important result of the UDL audit is, without question, the improved accessibility of all services. Guided by UDL's principles to provide Multiple Means of Representation and Multiple Means of Engagement, students now enjoy a wide array of access options when they seek the help of an adviser. The online provision of content allows students to access forms and information using assistive technology. Important information is provided using video clips and text in digital format, giving students access to information according to their preferences. The services offered are now designed to be accessible to, and inclusive of, our diverse student population.

The UDL audit's positive impact has gone beyond interaction with a diverse student body. It has created a new internal and external discourse that challenges the traditional perception of disability in higher education. This new discourse is composed of language, attitudes and interactions based on the social model of disability and the principles of UDL. The UDL audit has changed our practice and mission from the promotion of a social model of disability and UDL toward the implementation of both theoretical frameworks into daily practices and routines. The office now serves as role model for other units on campus, an important first step toward campus wide adoption of UDL.

A third outcome we've experience is that the UDL audit had a positive effect on the office itself, in the sense that the identification of procedural barriers has led to more sustainable internal practices by removing unnecessary procedures and red tape.

Finally, the UDL audit has shown that UDL can do much more than create accessible learning environments. UDL

can be transferred to almost any situation in which individuals interact with the environment. The degrees to which UDL can be implemented in certain areas, is physically contextual, but it also has the potential to transform cognitive environments and make them more accessible and inclusive. UDL's goal is to design inclusive and accessible learning environments. But, learning and social interaction do not stop outside the classroom. The logical consequence of this is that we need inclusive and accessible campus environments in higher education. Therefore, the principles of UDL need to be applied to a wider context such as student services, housing and admission. The UDL audit has started to gain momentum, with more units on campus becoming interested in making their services more accessible not only for students with disabilities but for diverse learners including the indigenous student population, English second language learners, etc. The First People's House and the Graduate Student Society are currently working on UDL audits of their services. Our pilot exploration of an UDL audit has shown that UDL can create accessible, inclusive environments beyond the classroom. In the future it will be interesting to see more research in this area, leading to the creation of UDL tools and checklists for many environments beyond the classroom.

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