

Online Learning and UDL: Tales from the Front

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Abstract

This presentation attempts to answer two questions: What is happening in current digital learning environments and how is Universal Design for Learning impacting these environments? Looking at three current examples of virtual teaching and learning taking place, as well as looking into the future, can inform overall understanding of digital learning environments, the forces that impact the trajectory of digital learning, and Universal Design for Learning.

Keywords

Digital Learning, Disrupted Education

INTRODUCTION

Online learning is defined as “teacher-led education that takes place over the Internet, with the teacher and student separated geographically” (Watson et al., 2011, p. 12). The Internet and other computer technologies can deliver online content using audio, live interactive video, and prerecorded video formats. There are two primary modes of online course delivery, synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous instruction allows students and teachers to interact in real time. Asynchronous instruction occurs across a predetermined time span. For example, in asynchronous learning students are presented with an online lesson which they must complete and post responses to within a predetermined period of time. There are also hybrid models that combine technology delivery with face-to-face interactions among teachers and students.

Online environments can support many types of learners including students who qualify for special education services, English Language Learners (ELL), students who receive free and reduced-price lunch, and students from varied ethnographic backgrounds. While the continued growth, availability, and convenience of online courses are leading to more participation by all groups of students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), there is new evidence that traditionally marginalized populations, such as students with disabilities, increasingly choose to participate in online courses (Thompson, Ferdig, & Black, 2012). Therefore, it is imperative that the educational community understands how to provide high quality online instruction that learning needs of these students.

TALES FROM THE FRONT

In order to illustrate current practice and thinking around online learning, this presentation focuses briefly on four distinct online learning programs. Each program is examined through the lens of UDL. It also delineates the pres-

ures experienced by the programs while operating and planning for growth.

Minnesota State University System

The State University System in Minnesota serves many rural communities. Those communities are in need of Special Education teachers. Many potential candidates live in these rural areas and are location bound, often currently working as para-professionals in local schools. The Southwest / West Central Service Cooperative supports and provides special education services to the Southwest and West Central areas of rural Minnesota. They have recently approached Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU) to offer a fully online special education teacher training program to location bound para-professionals as a way to fill the severe teacher education shortage.

SMSU currently offers a wide variety of online classes to fulfill Special Education licensure program requirements. The education department faculty is currently involved in understanding UDL through professional development that includes book studies and department trainings as a way to enhance both face-to-face course delivery as well as their growing need to deliver online instruction.

California State University System

The California State University (CSU) system promotes UDL through a program titled Ensuring Access through Collaboration and Technology (EnACT). This faculty development model is meant to guide and support postsecondary faculty to improve education for all students. As with Minnesota State Universities, CSU hopes to reduce a severe teacher shortage, especially in the area of Special Education teachers, through expanded use of online pre-service courses.

CSU is committed to hiring and training faculty in UDL. As a consequence, they are raising critical issues regarding online learning environments. These issues relate to the relationships between pedagogy and digital learning. Does digital learning require a discrete set of pedagogical principles, or does traditional face-to-face pedagogy transfer?

Washington Virtual Academies

Washington Virtual Academies, a public K-12 school that is totally online, has participated in several studies looking at their delivery of online curriculum. This online school has also struggled with a legislature that is suspicious of digital learning for early grades, K-5, and the low-test scores on State wide assessments for students attending the online school.

Initial information regarding the 2014/2015 school year reveals changes in both curriculum and delivery. Students now are aggressively placed in grade level curriculum, taking five sessions of synchronous teacher led classes a week. The Common Core is used, almost exclusively, for developing Individual Education Plan goals.

The Future

Digital learning continues to vex many educators as well as policy makers. It is difficult to study and not easily understood. The potential of students, especially students with special learning needs, to become expert learners exists. However, that promise will only happen with more research. In the opinion of this researcher, UDL holds the key to creating digital learning environments that effectively serve all learners.

In the near future three areas will become prominent: continued demand for online learning and the concept of disrupted education within traditional school systems, gamification, and teachers practicing across geographic boundaries via online delivery.

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