Incorporating Inclusive Assessment and Universal Design within the Curriculum

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Abstract

This session introduces the current climate at the University of Sydney with regards to Universal Design for Learning with a focus on assessment. An overview will be provided which will include the legislative requirements regarding education for people with disability in Australia; the progress the University has made in introducing and implementing Universal Design for Learning; the challenges and next steps.

Keywords

Assessment; Implementation; Challenges

INTRODUCTION

The current climate at The University of Sydney Disability Services (USYD) is very reactive when it comes to making the learning environment accessible. This includes the way in which the curriculum is currently delivered to all students where Universal Design Principles are not at the forefront of priorities in the planning stage of curriculum design. The University is bound by relevant Australian Legislation, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability 2006, Disability Discrimination Act 1992, Disability Standards for Education 2005 which mandates education provides to ensure individuals with disability are able to access education. The University's Disability Action Plan (DAP), is a key policy document which governs all diversity and inclusion initiatives. The DAP allows the University to take a responsible and coordinated approach to ensure access and inclusion for all, within all environments of the university.

BACKGROUND

Disability Services at the University of Sydney (USY) provides support to students with disability to access reasonable adjustments to their studies. A large component of these adjustments are implemented within assessment tasks and include extra time, breaks during exams and separate supervision rather than the opportunity to have access to alternative methods of assessment. Disability Services were aware that the reasonable adjustments that were being put in place were not necessarily meeting the needs of the student or the academics.

According to Wakefield (2011), in the UDL framework, assessment is described as the process of gathering information about a learner's performance using a variety of methods and materials in order to determine learners' knowledge, skills, and motivation for the purpose of making informed educational decisions.

Disability Services began to consider that if students were offered different formats of assessments over the semester it may reduce the need for reasonable adjustments for individual students and provide opportunities for students to clearly and creatively demonstrate their mastery of a course.

PRINCIPLES OF UDL IN ASSESSMENT

According to Burgstahler (2015), Universal Design for Learning is a set of principles for curriculum development that provide all individuals equal opportunities to learn. UDL for learning provides a blueprint for implementing flexible learning environments, goals, pedagogies and assessments that accommodate learner differences.

The key is to incorporate UDL in the planning stage within the key areas of the curriculum. Assessment, teaching, digital and online material and the University central management system Canvas.

The goal of applying UDL to assessment is to design and develop assessment which allows participation and success for all students. Incorporating UDL within assessment provides benefits in workload flexibility and learning management tools for students, provides equivalence in learning via multiple means of demonstrating this learning, reduces staff workload through minimizing the need for in-semester bespoke adjustments for disability conditions. Burgstahler (2015)

IMPLEMENTATION

A strategic goal within the USY's 2016-2020 Strategic Plan was to undergo a transformation of the undergraduate curriculum to develop a new educational experience for all undergraduates. Simultaneously the University was transitioning to a new Learning Management System. Disability Services determined this was an opportune time to introduce UDL to the wider University community. A multi-prong approach was used to commence the introduction and implementation of UDL. Disability Services implemented a number of initiatives to introduce UDL to the University including:

- Collaboration with the teams within the University that were driving the changes within the curriculum to incorporate principles of UDL within assessment planning.

- Provision of UDL content for workshops that were being facilitated to provide academic staff

with knowledge on how to incorporate graduate qualities into assessments.

- Provision of a session on how to incorporate UDL into the new Learning Management System that was under development ready for roll out in 2018 across the University.
- Provision of targeted UDL and inclusive assessment training sessions to faculties and during forums for academic and professional staff.

CHALLENGES

There were and continue to be challenges to introducing and implementing UDL at the University. The University of Sydney is undergoing major changes in regards to organisational structure, curriculum, faculty processes and the introduction of a new Learning Management System. The introduction of UDL has been an initiative of Disability Services with support from some faculty staff and is not a top down approach with deadlines for implementation. The other initiatives that are embedded within the strategic plan and have deadlines for implementation have been a priority for academics.

Disability Services found that they had the most success when the implementation activities focused on one aspect of the teaching environment, in particular the Learning Management System. The implementation of UDL in all aspects of the curriculum is a large-scale project which in the current climate of major change is challenging to implement.

NEXT STEPS

The current aim of USY's Disability Services is to educate the university around the importance of incorporating UDL principles with the planning stage of curriculum design. This includes teaching, materials and assessment.

Incorporating Inclusive Assessment and Universal Design within the curriculum is a key objective of the next University DAP to ensure this objective is prioritized, implemented, measured and evaluated.

The key next steps will include working with the Assessment working group, Education Innovation team and Academic board to ensure a top down approach and to achieve big picture changes. In addition, the focus will be on University-wide education and training through the facilitation of faculty specific workshops on UDL and the development of resources and tools to incorporate UDL in teaching practices and materials.

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