

From R&D to Reality: A Practical UDL Implementation Strategy

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Abstract

In this engaging breakout session, participants will discover methods for implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles across disciplines, training stakeholders in UDL best practices, and creating a collaborative environment for advancing UDL research and implementation. Bellevue University course designers will share their experiences recounting their transition from the research and design phase to full UDL implementation. Learn how they overcame challenges, collaborated with faculty and administrators, and created innovative training opportunities to assist stakeholders through the implementation strategy. Participants will leave with practical advice and valuable resources to create a training and implementation strategy for their own faculty and staff.

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, Bellevue University (BU) began the journey of creating a new academic learning model. The goal of the new model was to bring BU to the cutting edge of relevance. In the past, the key to getting a good job was a college degree. However, as the cost of a college degree has risen dramatically, value has not kept pace. In an article from *The Economist*, an example is given from "a federal survey showed that the literacy of college-educated citizens declined between 1992 and 2003. Only a quarter were deemed proficient, defined as using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential" ("Not What," 2012).

Our research revealed that many students avoid courses that require heavy reading and spend much less time studying. Many do not even graduate. According to the same article, "nearly 30% of college students who took out loans eventually dropped out (up from 25% a decade ago). These students are saddled with a debt they have no realistic means of paying off" (Not What it used to be ..., 2012).

Another issue identified at BU is the changing demographics of the student body. While "traditional" students, new high school graduates continue to enroll at BU, they make up a very small percentage of our entire student body. Nationwide, the typical college student is over 30, a significant shift for higher education. In *Old School: College's Most Important Trend is the Rise of the Adult Student*, Hess states that "thirty-eight percent of those enrolled in higher education are over the age of 25 and one-fourth are over the age of 30. The share of

all students who are over age 25 is projected to increase another twenty-three percent by 2019" (Hess, 2011).

To remain viable, BU had to take a look at our "traditional" curriculum and make the paradigm shift to meet the needs of 21st century students. Traditionally, higher education has focused on delivering knowledge via the "sage on the stage" with lectures, rote-memory based quizzes, and discussion that remains "siloes" within particular disciplines. In order to accommodate the 21st century needs of students and future employers, a shift to the "guide on the side" was paramount. Our curriculum and learning model had to change. The bonus for BU was that the time was right to implement UDL.

FROM R&D TO IMPLEMENTATION

With all of the key issues identified, the overarching question became "How can we be student centered, market-focused, analytic-data driven, lean, agile, and highly effective in developing faculty-student relationships and drive student skills and performance to market-determined levels?" An innovative research and development team was formed to find the answers. The team developed a pilot program based loosely on performance-based learning principles, a model known as Skills-to-Performance.

A pilot of this model has been executed and tested within a portion of Bellevue University. Skills-to-Performance has been several years in the making. Many elements have been tried and much has been learned throughout its development. Now we are in the process of moving Skills-to-Performance out of the R&D phase and into the normal course development cycle. Eventually, all of our courses will follow this model.

Bellevue University does not want to teach discrete bits of knowledge with the hope that students will assemble the information into a cohesive whole. We do not believe in building dependency on textbooks or "iconic" ideas – but seek to build a learner empowered by a framework of linked knowledge, behaviors, and skills mapped to provide a definable path to mastery of the necessary skills. We want students to be able to craft and customize their own path to, personalized, knowledge-skill-mastery.

With that in mind, new curricula needed to be developed and mapped focusing on skills that accommodate different learning styles. Performance mastery and curricula development must be tailored to accommodate differ-

ences in learner preparation, abilities, and recursive practice.

Performance-based learning is centered on “doing” or the practical application of knowledge or theories. A background in traditional programs or course design is both an asset and a liability in this context. The assets of an educator include a familiarization with how students learn vast amounts of subject matter and a foundation in curriculum development. However, with Skills-to-Performance, the way curriculum is developed will be very different. The designers must realize that this transition period also offers a unique opportunity to advance UDL best practices. By implementing the learning model and UDL simultaneously, the designers increase education equity in a truly student-centric model.

UDL AT BU

The designers had been actively researching and testing UDL principles in collaboration with the innovation team at BU for several years. The innovation team was experimenting with advanced analytics, which allowed the designers to see how their learning objects were impacting student performance. By collaborating with faculty and administrators, they developed UDL-based learning objects and individual courses across multiple disciplines, and monitored the analytics closely.

The transition to a university-wide, performance-based learning model also resulted in a merger of the design and innovation teams. The newly developed Design and Development team was tasked with creating an online training program that would assist faculty and staff with the transition. They introduced BU to both Skills-to-Performance and UDL principles simultaneously, by incorporating UDL-based learning objects, content, and assessments throughout the training program. As they went through the training, faculty began to see how performance-based learning and UDL principles could engage their students in a whole new way.

Throughout the transition to the new learning model, the designers have also continued to educate faculty and staff on ways to incorporate UDL into their programs. The designers partnered with The Center, a new BU program, to offer interdisciplinary workshops where faculty could share their ideas, offer advice, and see examples of successful UDL implementation in other programs.

THE CENTER

The first version of the Skills-to-Performance training presented too much information. We were excited and wanted our faculty to be just as excited and ready for the big changes that were coming. After the first round of online and workshop training, it became clear that this would not be the case; faculty were simply overloaded. We had been working on the Skills-to-Performance learning model for several years, but it had not yet been introduced to all faculty and staff.

It was determined that a new strategy was needed to provide assistance not only to faculty making the transition, but also to offer comprehensive professional development opportunities for ALL BU faculties at all levels and across all colleges and centers. The purpose of The Center is to help our program directors, faculty, and subject matter experts transition to Skills-to-Performance, but also to enhance our unique BU academic culture and support innovations in teaching.

A comprehensive training program was created for The Center. The training was organized into similar concepts, called workshops, which limited the quantity of material covered at one time. Within each workshop are a series of skill-building activities which allow the learner to practice the new concepts with the understanding that The Center was available any time help is needed. The activities are created in a way that allows The Center staff to fulfill a mentorship role.

It is within The Center that UDL is first presented. When it has been determined that a program will be converted to the new learning model, a meeting is set up with the Program Director (PD) and The Center staff. One of the topics for this meeting is a high-level overview of our program development cycle, which includes small units of UDL. The PD is then enrolled in the first workshop which covers how a program is developed from research to the program mapping process. When all of the activities for Workshop 1 are completed to The Center's satisfaction, the PD moves on to Workshop 2.

Workshop 2 contains two major sections in which we have been able to integrate UDL into the process itself. The first is the Subject Matter Expert (SME) process, and the other is the Course Design process. The SME workshop contains an overview of UDL, its origins and efficacy. As they progress through the workshop, they are then given a series of worksheets that will walk them through the process of planning and gathering the content for that course. We want them to really think about how they would present the course content to students, and then decide if there is only one or alternate paths to learning.

The SME gathers the content and makes notes about possible alternatives, but it is the Course Designer (CD) that will build the course. When the content of the new course is completed, the CD will design, and then build, the course within the BU Learning Management System. We have researched UDL extensively, and have determined that these five strategies as explained by Tobin (2014) work well for us:

Start with text: Build multiple paths based on a text foundation.

Create alternatives: At first, create two versions of content/materials, and then branch out.

Let ‘em do it their way: Instructors set the objectives, students define the method & medium.

Go step by step: Break processes into units, steps, phases, and create separate resources.

Set content free: Use tools that are accessible and easy for faculty and students to learn. (Tobin, 2014).

SUMMARY - TAKE AWAYS

The transition to performance-based learning and UDL implementation is still underway at Bellevue University. The designers are continually revising and updating their training materials to reflect faculty needs and feedback. Through analytics and university-wide surveys, these designers are continuing to find practical solutions to common implementation roadblocks. We have learned that the key to successfully implementing UDL is to start small, take baby steps, and make sure everyone is on board before the UDL train leaves the station.

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