

Beyond Ownership of the Model - Building UDL Alliances in Post-Secondary Education Outside Disability Service Provision

Frederic Fovet

McGill University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada
frederic.fovett@mcgill.ca

Tanja Beck

McGill University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada
tanja.beck@mcgill.ca

Abstract

To date, UDL implementation in the post-secondary sector has been mostly led by disability service providers. This narrative examines: (a) How effective collaboration with social justice partners creates more exposure for UDL implementation and offers more chances for successful implementation on post-secondary campuses; (b) the trajectory of a post-secondary Canadian disability service provider as it completes its 4th year of proactive UDL implementation; and (c) the importance of dynamic and organic relationships and alliances with social justice partners on campus, as part of a disability service provider's efforts to broaden UDL adoption across campus faculties. It analyses data collected over a three year period to identify key factors that have led to greater UDL awareness and faster adoption of the model beyond its relevance to students with disabilities. The discussion section endeavors to examine how to build these successful partnerships, and how best to frame the UDL model in order to appeal to units such as Teaching and Learning Services, Indigenous groups, international student advocates, and feminist and LGBT lobby groups.

Keywords

UDL, post-secondary education, social justice, diversity.

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of UDL in post-secondary teaching is such a monumental task that much of the discussions in this environment center on instructor attitudes and how to best appeal to faculty to trigger pedagogical change (Harrison, 2006). The most immediate and successful way of creating awareness and a sense of urgency has, in the last decade, been to highlight and emphasize the growing demographics of students with disabilities and the challenge this phenomenon represents for inclusion (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

This narrative seeks to demonstrate that the global approach to UDL implementation has been relatively successful, but has also confined the discourse on UDL to the sphere of disability services. Within the current discourse, with its focus on students with disabilities, we risk overlooking the rich possibilities of an interdisciplinary dialogue that addresses the benefits of UDL within a social justice framework, notably a dialog with equity and diversity partners (Bowe, 2000).

This reflective narrative examines our campus's four year effort to implement UDL systemically. It identifies missed opportunities to involve diversity partners in the UDL discourse, and identifies rich opportunities in the future that may provide momentum to the UDL implementation efforts through broadening objectives and target audiences.

CONTEXT

Our campus began its UDL implementation drive four years ago. The push for UDL implementation was led by the campus disability service provider and therefore originated outside of faculty efforts or campus pedagogical resource services.

The catalyst for the effort to implement UDL was an emerging crisis within the disability landscape itself. The volume of students requesting disability services had quadrupled over a three year period. The sense of urgency surrounding UDL implementation came from the realization that traditional disability support services were no longer able to deal with demand in a sustainable fashion. Therefore, their efforts were restricted to resource management.

As the campus disability service provider unit proceeded to promote UDL on campus amongst faculty and senior administration, the unit came to the realization that UDL implementation had implications beyond the classroom. The first initiative occurred when the unit underwent a UDL analysis of its own, taking a year to identify and analyze the barriers for students with disabilities created by the unit itself. The disability service provider quickly came to recognize the relevance of UDL to other student services and student affairs units. It embarked on a second initiative that focused on encouraging other campus services to consider and implement the three principles of UDL when designing their interaction with students.

However, these two initiatives were still centered on the notion of broadening access specifically for students with disabilities. As the UDL implementation matured, it became increasingly apparent that there needed to be a modification in the discourse. The rationale for UDL implementation and its benefits needed to include provisions ensuring equal access for ALL students. This evolution of the UDL message on this campus has created certain challenges for the disability service provider. It has fostered collaboration between traditionally insular support services. Additionally it has created remarkable new opportunities for teaming up with social justice partners on our campus, and prompted a

reframing of issues of inclusion in post-secondary education.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The paper situates its reflection within an eco-systemic theoretical framework, as it examines the process of UDL implementation in a complex multi-layered environment. Within this environment, acceptance of, or resistance to UDL varies among the numerous service units. The data gathered in our research is qualitative and it has been collected amongst the various implementation partners on our campus over a four year period. Our analysis of the qualitative data was carried out through progressive manual coding.

CHALLENGES

The challenges reported in our narrative are two-fold. First, our narrative assesses the extent to which the UDL discourse has, over the last two decades, progressively grounded itself within a disability perspective. Secondly, service staff queried for this project relate in their narratives the difficulty of bridging the significant divides that exist between different support services providers in post-secondary education. Both these analyses have wider relevance and eventual transferability to other campuses and higher education environments.

Framing of the UDL message

Though the framing of UDL within a disability perspective has contributed to the momentum behind UDL's implementation concurrent with an increase in the number of post-secondary students claiming a disability, these demographic shifts are also creating conflicts between disability advocates and diversity officers. Based on our analysis of the data we gathered, diversity and equity personnel are less likely to feel at ease with the disability service model because of its current failure in highlighting benefits for students who are diverse but not reporting any impairment. The analysis of the qualitative data accumulated over this four year period shows the need to reframe UDL materials on higher education campuses in a way that is mindful of social and cultural diversity.

Initiating Collaborative partnerships

Much of the data we've gathered highlights the difficulties student support service programs focusing on social justice and inclusion are facing in their efforts to collaborate and create bridges, particularly when it comes to adopting a universal approach to faculty outreach. A degree of collaboration was rapidly achieved on our campus when the Teaching and Learning Services unit, the Office for Students with Disabilities, and the Social Equity and Diversity Education Office came together, one year into the implementation effort. They organized and hosted an information session on UDL for the entire McGill University executive body. Shortly after this event, a working group on the inclusion of diverse learners was formed, which included the original partners but added the First People's House (an academic support program for students of Indigenous cul-

ture) and the Institute for Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies. The analysis of much of the data emanating from the discussions of this group yields evidence of significant theoretical and discursive differences between these partners. Although many of the pedagogical approaches promoted by these social justice partners are well situated within a UDL framework, they have been reluctant to adopt a clear UDL perspective. In addition, a theme emerged, through our analysis of the data, that although the various partners saw themselves as connected key players on inclusion and equity, there was little consensus as to what the practicalities of inclusion policies should be.

OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the two main challenges identified though this implementation experience, several other opportunities also emerged from the analysis of the data. These results are transferable to other post-secondary campuses and environments, and may serve as a strategic checklist for social justice partners interested in framing an inclusion policy around UDL.

First, it seems entirely feasible to reframe the language and the objectives of UDL to suit the mandate of the majority of social justice partners. However, this will require UDL advocates to discuss the three principles of UDL not just in terms of format and mode of delivery, but also in terms of content. Reaching students through multiple means also requires stakeholders to reflect on whether examples, illustrations, and case studies, etc., mirror an understanding of diversity in its broadest sense.

Secondly, a lesson can be drawn from our campus's experience as to how to increase the momentum of inclusion dialogue on a campus by overcoming traditional insularity. Much of the discourse on UDL has historically been perceived as a minority discourse. If social justice advocates in the post-secondary field decide to logistically share the same language, a realization that inclusion has become a majority discourse – an issue that concerns a vast amount of post-secondary students – needs to occur. This subsequently and inevitably will attract interest from senior administration in terms of retention, revenue and sustainable development (Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003).

OUTCOMES AND DISCUSSION

It is hoped that the reflection we present in this narrative can be transferred to other campuses which are in the process of implementing UDL. The lessons presented are sufficiently tangible to serve as guidelines to other campuses initiating such a drive, in how to diversify the UDL discourse from the start so as to gain maximum momentum.

This narrative also serves as a reflection on interdisciplinary collaboration within traditionally insular post-secondary service providers. In the field of diversity, it seems particularly important to recognize and analyze any successful collaborations of the kind we've reported here. It highlights the frequency of such interdisciplinary efforts,

and it helps identify conditions necessary for such partnering.

Finally, one additional element for discussion is perhaps determining why it is currently easier to approach faculty to discuss inclusion in the context of disability, rather than culture, gender, sexuality or race. Why is pedagogical reform only conceivable within the sphere of disability, but not on the basis of social and personal diversity? What might be the next important set of agendas and actions required on post-secondary campuses that will allow new, rich debate on equity and diversity that, in turn, informs a rethinking of pedagogy?

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