Designing for Learning in Higher Education

Holly Buckland Parker
Center for Teaching and Learning
Faculty Development Specialist
University of Vermont
Burlington, VT, USA
Holly.Parker@uvm.edu

Jennifer Dickinson
Center for Teaching and Learning
Director
University of Vermont
Burlington, VT, USA
Jennifer.Dickinson@uvm.edu

Susanmarie Harrington
Writing in the Disciplines Program
Director
University of Vermont
Burlington, VT, USA
Susan.Harrington@uvm.edu

Abstract

The University of Vermont's Designing for Learning Program is a unique collaboration between the Center for Teaching and Learning, the Writing in the Disciplines Program, and the College of Arts and Sciences. A cohort model is used each semester as part of building the community of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) knowledge. In each semester cohort, up to 10 College of Arts and Sciences faculty work to redesign their courses, using UDL principles in concert with backwards course design. The intentional application of UDL and backwards design helps to reinforce "tight goals and loose means" of infusing UDL into Higher Education course work. Each faculty member in the program participates in a series of five workshops on Universal Design for Learning and backwards course design. In addition, each faculty member has a teaching observation by a CTL staff member who guides them through the existing UDL components of their teaching and identifies places for improvement.

Keywords

Higher Education; Backwards Design; UDL Implementation

INTRODUCTION

The use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Higher Education is becoming more prevalent. The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) created a website called *UDL on Campus* in 2014 to showcase the efforts of UDL in Higher Education. The variability of learners in higher education is similar to K-12 Education. The supports, however, are different. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) gives students access to higher education, however they have to advocate for themselves and work with the Student Accessibility Office in order to get particular learning accommodations. The application of UDL in higher education aims to benefit all learners. UDL guidelines encourage instructors to provide multiple means of engagement and representation as well as action and expression. (Meyer, Rose, and Gordon, 2014). At the University of Vermont (UVM), the Designing for Learning program combines UDL with Backwards Course Design (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005). This framework encourages each faculty member to identify the most important course goals and the best options to assess students working towards the learning goals.

BACKGROUND

Since 2008 the University of Vermont (UVM) has worked on the implementation of Universal Design for Learning with faculty across campus. Initially this work was done through a one-million-dollar, three-year U.S. Department of Education grant entitled "Supporting Faculty to Teach all Students: A Universal Design Consulting Team Model". Co-principal investigators Dr. Susan Edelman and Dr. Lawrence Shelton were awarded the grant at UVM. This grant involved the Center for Teaching and Learning working with teams of consultants who raised the profile of UDL on campus and worked individually with faculty on consultation teams to redesign their courses. These teams were comprised of faculty, graduate students, staff, and undergraduate students. Once the grant came to a close in 2011, however, the support for UDL was focused in UVM's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and the Writing in the Disciplines Program (WID). CTL and WID could not provide the same level of support for faculty that the grant team had provided. When the Small Family Foundation approached the College of Arts and Sciences, interested in supporting an initiative that would encourage faculty to support students via UDL, the Designing for Learning program was born. The first cohort began in the fall semester of 2015.

DESIGNING FOR LEARNING PROGRAM

Program goal: Help faculty identify and reduce student barriers to learning in their courses

Participating faculty focus on (re)designing a specific course to address issues such as:

- Modifying an assignment sequence that is not currently effective

- Increasing the quality and quantity of student participation

- Creating course activities and materials that help students develop difficult-to-master skills or knowledge areas.

The program includes

- Five cohort meetings during the semester

- A Teaching consultation with Holly B. Parker from the CTL (Each observation includes a pre-observation, the class observation, and a post-observation meeting.)

two books on Teaching and Learning

• $600.00 grant at the successful completion of the program

Through the course of the program, we, the Designing for Learning Team, ask faculty to describe the barriers to learning they currently see in the course under revision. They are also asked to imagine what the course would look like without those barriers. Asking these questions while considering principles of Backwards Design and UDL results in a new vision of the course. In pairs or triads, faculty brainstorm ways to reduce barriers by focusing on the learning objectives for the course. During the process of speaking to their peers, faculty start to see how even small changes to the course design can help break down the barriers.

Faculty from a wide range of disciplines have participated in the program.

Department	Number of Faculty
Anthropology	2
Art	2
Asian Languages	1
Biology	2
Chemistry	1
English	5
Geography	2
Geology	2
History	1
Music and Dance	1
Philosophy	2
Political Science	1
Psychological Sciences	4
Religion	1
Romance Languages	3
Sociology	2
Theatre	1
Total participants	**33**

The application of UDL is not discipline-specific as evident in the chart above. In any discipline the application of UDL and backwards design makes learning opportunities available to all learners. During our process of working with faculty in the Designing for Learning program, once the barriers are identified, we focus on the goals for the course.

Disciplinary ways of thinking, knowing, and doing are supported through careful work on the identification of learning barriers and careful consideration of course learning goals. "Tight on goals, loose on means" is how former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan described his expectations of accountability systems, and that phrase aptly describes our aim for curriculum (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014, p.15). We encourage each faculty cohort to think broadly about how the specific learning goals for their courses can be met with a variety of student assessments. Also, we ask them to consider the use of formative check-ins with students so they have an idea of how well the students are grasping an important concept or meeting a learning goal throughout the course and not just at mid-terms and/or finals.

This digital poster will discuss the specifics of the program as well as share insights from faculty participants.

REFERENCES

Burgstahler, S.E. et al. (2015). *Universal design in higher education: From principles to practice*. Cambridge, MA. Harvard Education Press.

Meyer, A., Rose, D.H., & Gordon, D. (2014). *Universal design for learning: Theory and Practice*. Wakefield, MA: CAST Professional Publishing.

Rose, D., and Meyer, A. (2002). *Teaching Every Student in the Digital Age: Universal Design for Learning.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).

Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by Design*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Wiggins, G and McTighe J. *Understanding by Design: backward design, why "backward" is best.* [retrieved 3/7/17 from:https://www.edutopia.org/pdfs/resources/wiggins-mctighe-backward-design-why-backward-is-best.pdf]

UDL@UVM grant website [retrieved 3/7/17 from: http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/universaldesign/?Page=about-us/index.php&SM=about-us/submenu.html]

UDL on Campus Website http://udloncampus.cast.org/