

2008

Universal Design for Learning

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Recommended Citation

Lancaster, Paula (2008) "Universal Design for Learning," *Colleagues*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol3/iss1/5>

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By Paula Lancaster

In the winter of 2000 Dr. David Rose and Dr. Anne Meyer published an introduction to a special forum of the Journal of Special Education Technology on Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Within the introduction, they provided background information on UDL and describe how these principles can be applied to education. This column contains a summary of the key points made in the original publication, which can be accessed in full at the following address:

<http://jset.unlv.edu/15.1/asseds/rose.html>

The use of a centrally located elevator, an automatic door, read

“Instead of retrofitting curriculum for students via accommodations and modifications, the principles of UDL prompt teachers to design curriculum that is flexible and adaptable to multiple forms of learning and engagement to facilitate the learning of all students.”

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closed-captioning, or slice food with a soft-handled knife, exemplify the fruits of Universal Design (UD). The UD movement began over 20 years ago as architects and engineers realized that many of the structures and environments they designed and built were simply not usable by large portions of the population. Moreover, they saw that the ways in which their buildings were retrofitted to make them more accessible took away from the aesthetics of the original design and were often impractical or extremely costly. UD recognized the need to create structures from the onset that increased the functionality of the environment for all persons and recognized the divergent needs of special populations within the initial design.

Today most schools of architecture, engineering, and design programs include courses on the principles of UD. Thus, UD is firmly ingrained in these fields. The application of UD to the field of education is not another new program or a curriculum but rather a set of principles that can guide educators as they plan and deliver their instruction to students with a wide range of abilities called Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Instead of retrofitting curriculum for students via accommodations and modifications, the principles of UDL prompt teachers to design curriculum that is flexible and adaptable to multiple forms of learning and engagement to facilitate the learning of all students.

An important question to ask is, do we consider students with physical, sensory, and cognitive disabilities as we design our lessons or do we design lessons and then accommodate these barriers to learning? For example, a bright student with dyslexia or a student with a visual impairment may have access to concepts through accommodations of assistive technologies, but like retrofitted buildings, these technologies are expensive and may serve to identify and isolate students from their peers. Further, this application of UDL is conceptually too narrow. The principles of UDL apply to all students whether they have a distinct disability or not. Providing assistive technologies or accommodation is not the end goal but the <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol3/iss1/5>

beginning resulting in access to information for all students. To quote Rose and Meyer (2000), an important distinction between UD's application to architecture and its application to learning is the fact that:


Non-educators often make the mistake of equating "access to information" with "access to learning". In so doing, they assume that the goal of universal design in education is achieved by creating materials in which information is more accessible. The difference is in the goals.... Education is an exercise in constructing knowledge and skills. It requires a careful balance of support and resistance. Thus Universal Design for access provides the greatest amount of support possible at all times, while Universal Design for Learning requires careful attention to the goals of any given learning experience so that a balance of challenge and support can maximize the learning opportunity (p. 5)

Careful attention to goals is a vital part of UDL. Focusing on the principles of UDL during planning allows teachers to focus on critical outcomes for all students. Rose and Meyer assert that learning must go beyond access to materials and information. They suggest that flexibility is at the core of UDL and instruction that is effective for most learners.

The "universal" in Universal Design for Learning does not imply a single solution for everyone, but rather it underscores the need for inherently flexible, customizable content, assignments, and activities. Flexibility is essential for two reasons: (a) individual differences between learners and (b) differences between instructional media.

UDL achieves the goal of meeting individual needs by providing alternatives, not by seeking a single solution for all. Providing both stairs and ramps is preferable to trying to invent a single method of entry that works for all people at all times. Alternatives offer increased access for those who need it and also offer

opportunities for everyone to choose according to circumstances. Sometimes we prefer to use the stairs (e.g., to keep in shape, to avoid waiting for the elevator) and sometimes we prefer to use the elevator such as for very long vertical climbs or for carrying a lot of luggage (p.8).

As is the case with all aspects of education, one-size-fits-all solutions do not exist within UDL principles either. Different students, curriculum, teachers, and media present different strengths and challenges. Feel free to visit the following website to learn about a multitude of options available for ensuring  that all your students have access to learning.

<http://www.cast.org/>

Rose, D. & Meyer, A. (2000). Universal design for learning. *Journal of Special Education Technology*, (15)1, p 1- 12.

