Universal Design for Learning
Featurette

Considering UDL through an Accommodations Lens

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I recently met with a faculty member who was feeling overwhelmed at the number of requests they were receiving from students requiring extra time on tests. We went through a reflective exercise of the importance of time pressure. Is it necessary for students to complete a test in a certain length of time? If so, why? How is this connected to student learning? We also discussed why students with disabilities often request extra time as an accommodation. Some of the reasons include impacts related to speed of writing and reading, visual processing, reading comprehension, organization, anxiety, concentration, and distractibility.

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In this situation, the faculty determined that restricted time was not the purpose of the test, rather comprehension of core concepts was vital to student learning and progression through the program. Because timing was not an essential component to the test's design, the faculty was now able to explore different options for assessment that might better meet the needs of their students. As a solution, they allowed all students to complete assessments that could be written at any time during the week from home or in a computer lab and have up to 3 tries to aid their learning and comprehension of course material. This small adjustment to test design helped to reduce barriers related to time constraints while also encouraging students to learn which content areas they need to review in more depth to gain a better understanding of core concepts being taught. This, in turn, helps to develop their metacognitive skills and helps students become more self-reflective during learning, rather than focusing on their final test score.

Have you ever thought about unintended barriers in the way you design your courses? Have you considered the types of requests for accommodations you receive every semester from Accessible Learning Services? Do you find that you have students who do not have a formalized accommodation plan asking for similar supports (i.e. – from English language learners, parents with young children)? Taking the time to reflect on accommodation requests for your class can provide you with valuable feedback on potential access issues and barrier-prevention strategies.

From my position as an Accessibility Consultant, I have noticed an increase in requests for recording lectures and notetaking supports over the last 18 months. It is interesting to note that at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw a decrease in these requests due to courses being offered online. Many professors posted material, including recorded lectures. This normalized the need for students to review information at their own pace because many faculty members understood that the pandemic brought with it lots of barriers - everyone was at home (including young children), many students were sick from COVID, and many students were also dealing with mental health issues due to the increased isolation and lack of community supports.

If we use the framework of UDL, and in this particular case, the principle of multiple means of representation, we can see that this proactive approach to designing learning conditions provides options

and flexibility so that students can learn in a way that best suits their needs based on their learning profiles. When students have this kind of flexibility and are provided options in ways that they can access information, they are better in control of their learning progress and the context in which they may be learning, which can change from day to day or even hour to hour. This is the main purpose of the UDL framework – to help students learn how to become "expert learners."

Since many programs have gone back to in-person learning, there are less faculty members providing recordings of lectures as a resource for students. Due to this shift, the request for lecture recordings as an individual accommodation has increased. In terms of disability-related accommodations, recording of lectures provides support for students in areas related to executive functioning, working memory, auditory processing speed, organization, anxiety, concentration, and distractibility. Yet, as we see in the examples above, recordings are also extremely helpful when you are exhausted from childcare, a part-time job, or because you require repeated exposure to content as an English language learner. What we learn from students with disabilities helps us to reflect on UDL practices that benefit many other students as well. This is an important point to consider from an access perspective when switching back to in-person learning and reviewing course design. With the increase in the use of technology in the classroom, it may be more feasible to incorporate recorded lectures for all students – or provide access to previous recordings for students to refer to.

UDL promotes broader accessibility, offering a framework for ongoing reflection on the diverse needs of learners and making enhancements to adapt to evolving student landscapes. If you are interested in evaluating your course from an accommodation's lens, I am happy to consult with you and discuss ways that are possible to proactively design learning experiences that have as few barriers as possible so that students are given the best opportunity to demonstrate their potential.

I will be hosting two UDL Community of Practice meet-ups that are coming up on Feb 12th and 13th. I will lead an informal conversation on the intersection of UDL and accommodations, where there are possibilities and where there may be tensions. I welcome you to join the conversation. Sign-up for one of them on Cornerstone.