

Creating Inclusive Learning Opportunities in Higher Education: A Universal Design Toolkit

reviewed by Frédéric Fovet

Title: Creating Inclusive Learning Opportunities in Higher Education: A Universal Design Toolkit

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For over two decades now, Sheryl Brugstahler has generated resources and know-how related to the use of Universal Design (UD) in Higher Education (HE) through the DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) Center at the University of Washington; this volume therefore complements an established and well-respected range of tools and textbooks that has been extensively used by researchers and practitioners for some time, the most famous of which, *Universal Design in Higher Education: Promising Practices* (2013), is published in open access format and remains foundational.

Creating Inclusive Learning Opportunities in Higher Education is hands-on in its approach, opting for accessible and straightforward processes that are devoid of jargon or unnecessary academic theorizing. It is made appealing by the inclusion of abundant tables, graphs, and illustrations, and explicitly seeks to address the needs of a wide range of readers and practitioners (disability services, IT departments, instructors, teaching and learning staff, and EDI specialists) (p. XV). It also defines access widely, well beyond disability and impairment, and ambitiously wishes to guide “people who take actions, large and small, to promote a world that fully includes people who do not look like them, talk like them, think like them, or act like them” (p. III). The pragmatic flavor of the text is further emphasized by the convenient and intuitive use of REFLECT, LEARN, and APPLY labels throughout. There is a deep and effective reflection apparent in the prose that seeks to model and not just preach about UD, and the volume avoids the usual pitfalls many authors succumb to: discussing accessibility in an inaccessible fashion.

The first three chapters touch on the history of disability services and accessibility initiatives in HE, on the various models of inclusion used in the field (UD, UDI, UDL, and UDHE), and on the barriers often present in physical spaces within HE. The content in these first chapters is not ground-breaking but does offer the novice practitioner an effective and user-friendly introduction and summary. The fourth chapter on UD and technology is exhaustive and detailed, and offers rich and pertinent resources. The chapter reminds us that accessibility in technology has always been a central focus of DO-IT, and an area in which the center has been a trendsetter. Chapter 5 focuses on instruction and blends UDI and UDL perspectives; it represents the cornerstone of the volume and will be the section most useful to instructors. Chapter 6 consolidates this central tool kit by examining the many ways teaching and learning services can support the adoption of UD principles in the classroom.

Chapter 7 offers an interesting additional perspective—one rarely addressed in the UD literature: it examines how best to integrate UD awareness into the content of courses themselves, across disciplines. This is one of the highlights of the volume, and it demonstrates innovation and creativity in terms of applying a UD approach to advocacy itself, through the creation of curriculum content that integrates and showcases a reflection on inclusive design irrespective of discipline. Here again, the main objective becomes modeling in the class itself, rather than preaching.

The end of the volume examines the broader ecological theme of UD adoption as a management of change process across campuses. It is a thorough section that examines all stakeholders and offers careful technical, administrative, and legislative considerations and advice that will be useful on any campus. This insight into the cross-campus UD adoption process is useful and carefully drafted, but it still to some extent reads as wishful thinking rather than a pragmatic analysis of the challenges that are currently emerging already in institutions across North America. There is a need at this juncture, within the inclusion landscape in HE, for a more realistic and gritty analysis of failures, factors of resistance, and political push-backs that frequently hinder UD efforts across institutions. It can be argued that the volume does not offer a fair and lucid overview of the current significant obstacles that UD advocates regularly face on most fronts or across numerous campuses.

Other issues also limit to some extent the scope of the volume as a toolkit. First, its vision and objectives remain U.S.-centric. It is not obvious whether, at this stage of the global UD implementation adoption drive, this volume necessarily remains as pertinent as it could be even to Canadian practitioners. There have also now been considerable efforts deployed in relation to UDL implementation in HE: in Ireland through the work of AHEAD (2021), in Belgium through the activities of SIHO (2021), and in Norway with the work of Universell (2021). Exceptional work around UDL has also been showcased in Spain and led by the DUALETIC Project (2021) and Fondation Once (2021). Beyond this mammoth growth in European UDL advocacy in HE, it is sadly important to note that the UDL discourse has thus far remained strictly framed in a Global North discourse; this is now rapidly changing, and the “decolonizing the curriculum” movement has definitely had a firm impact on

righting this omission. Voices from the Global South are emerging in the area of UDL implementation (Dalton et al., 2019; Sheik Mohamed & Sivakumar, 2020), and it is essential that the distinct variables that affect UDL adoption in Global South contexts now be identified, mentioned, and analyzed. These global experiences across jurisdictions must be acknowledged, and it is reductionist to still consider UDL solely through a Global North or U.S. lens.

The other difficulty in this volume that may challenge the reader is that, though it acknowledges the dichotomy and tension that exist between UD, UDI, UDL, and UDHE, it offers the general practitioner very little understanding of or justification for the existence of so many different models with distinct principles and varying approaches. This tension, and the complexity it creates, in fact significantly undermines the efforts currently being deployed for the adoption of inclusive design in pedagogy. The momentum around UD has now reached a juncture globally, where this ambivalence must be resolved or it may limit its success and impact. The volume does not go far enough in the process of rationalizing what are essentially academic divergences, and this is problematic in a handbook that seeks to be user-friendly, common-sense, and immediately hands-on. The wide variety of models and terminologies is off-putting to the professionals that may be seeking to familiarize themselves with this field.

The most significant omission in the volume is the fact that the lens remains predominantly focused on disability and impairment, even if the opening statements recognize the need to widen this discourse to learner diversity in its broader sense. An analysis of barriers faced by students in HE must go well beyond accessibility and examine the many obstacles traditional pedagogy is creating for a wide variety of diverse learners: racialized, Indigenous, LGBTQ2S+, international, second language, and first-generation students among others. Although this broader view is announced early on in the volume, it is not explicitly delivered. Most UDL advocacy groups and scholars have indeed come to the realization that UDL must be considered with the wider landscape of critical pedagogy to remain relevant in the contemporary HE landscape (CAST, 2020).

The volume remains a very important resource for any HE practitioner new to this topic. It stands out for its clarity, user-friendliness, determination to apply the UD approach to the very crafting of its prose, and its desire to aim for simplicity first and foremost. Burgstahler must also be congratulated for her personalized tone, her willingness to share her journey and experiences, and the care she has placed in making this narrative hospitable. The voice of the author is strong throughout and supportive, and will be comforting to the UDL novice. The volume reads like a fireside chat offered by a well-experienced mentor, and this is a very effective and powerful tone for a handbook.

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