

Graduation Station: A Game for Professional Development in Universal Design

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Our Universal Design Team at Central New Mexico Community College (CNM) created a role-playing game for use in an annual professional development conference. This engaging activity is a way to explore barriers to student success and open a dialogue about universal design (UD) and how it supports student success. CNM is an urban community college in the greater Albuquerque, NM area, with an enrollment of approximately 29,000 students. This article describes an activity introducing instructors to the need for and principles of UD at a community college with a population of non-residential and largely non-traditional students. Many of our students have jobs and families in addition to the responsibilities of being a student, and these considerations are part of their lives, and need to be factored into our design and delivery of instruction. UD provides a framework for doing that. Faculty at community colleges typically serve as the front line, and are often the only contact that students may have with the broader institution (Grubb, 2013). Therefore, professional development for community college faculty in UD principles is crucial to helping them support students with disabilities (Sweener & Kundert, 2002).

Methods

The Cooperative for Teaching and Learning (CTL) conference at our school is a venue for instructors to present the best and most promising practices to their colleagues. Training allows faculty to stay updated on current pedagogy, theory, and practice. For community college faculty, having the tools to deal with diverse students in the classroom is essential to achieving successful learning outcomes (Outcait, 2002). The Universal Design Team decided to deliver a presentation at the conference. The presentation objectives were for faculty participants to be able to identify challenges students with disabilities face inside and outside of the classroom as well as UD strategies they can implement to promote the learning of all students in their classes. We modeled the application of UD principles in our presentation, just as we encourage faculty members to do in their classrooms. Specifically, we created various ways for participants to learn about disabilities and UD. We provided an overview of UD, including its nine principles (Burgstahler, 2015), as a framework to improve learning for all students. That part of the presen-

tation was visual along with some audio elements. It was followed by a UD-focused game, which was both an active learning experience and an example of a UD strategy that increases awareness of disability-related issues. Throughout the training we created a welcoming and understanding environment, which is also an important part of a universally designed class.

“In order for someone to be really effective, they must walk in another person’s shoes, even if it’s for a few minutes. Those few minutes will leave a lasting impression on one’s mind.” This is a quote from a former CNM student with a disability. In one of his classes, he gave a presentation on what it was like to have his disability by having his classmates do a role-playing experience. The members of the class left with a much better idea of what he experiences on a daily basis and could then better relate to him as a person, student, and classmate. We decided to expand that idea in the design of our role-playing game. The purpose of the game was to help instructors understand the challenges some students have in and outside of class. Many students are perfectly capable of learning the material that we present to them, but we might need to consider making adjustments in timelines and modes of presentation to facilitate students’ demonstration of their knowledge and capabilities. Barriers can intentionally or accidentally prevent students from reaching their goal of graduation (Cheng, 2013).

In our game, there are four volunteer players who represent students. The object of the game is for the four “students” to reach a mortarboard on the other side of the room and graduate. One student has a visual impairment, another uses a wheelchair, the third has a hearing impairment, and the fourth has a psychiatric disorder. Each student has a volunteer guide who has a set of color-coded cards (see Appendix) that they read in sequence to the student and the rest of the audience. Necessary props include: a mortarboard, a blindfold, a rolling chair, noise dampening headphones, and the cards. We printed the cards in color, one color for each student and laminated the cards for ease of use. Cards should be pre-sorted and read in sequence by each guide. Approximate number of students, guides, and audience members should ideally be 10 people. This can be done with fewer players. The organizer acts as the master of ceremony (MC) and referee. This can be done in front of a larger audience.

The cards describe events that might happen to a student. The student is instructed to move towards or away from the mortarboard depending on the event described on the card. Some of the events are specific to the student’s disability, while others are things that could happen to any student. In some cases, the player is asked a question and has to make a decision. The audience then decides, based on their reaction to the student’s decision, what the consequence will be. Does the student move forward toward graduation or take a step back?

For example, the guide could read the following card,

*Uh-oh! You’re a statistic! Your car is stolen, along with your textbooks and laptop.
Take three steps back.*

The “student” then moves away from the prized mortarboard. Similarly, other cards prompt the student to move forward. However, some cards prompt the “student” to make decisions.

*Your specially-equipped van breaks down. You are unable to get to class for a week.
What do you do?*

Here the student has to make a decision. Once the student shares their decision with the group, the audience then determines how many steps forward or backward the student should take. This is based on their

professional determination, as educators, of the wisdom of the decision. The MC acts as referee, and then directs the student to move the recommended number of steps.

Outcomes

In January of 2015, we piloted the UD Game at our annual CTL conference. Like many academic conferences, our sessions run 75 minutes. This afforded us ample time to run the UD Game. Approximately 30 faculty members attended our session. After our initial overview of universal design and the project, we started the game.

We explained the rules, the roles and the guidelines to the audience. Four faculty members stepped up to play the students; four guides stepped up as well. Both veterans and new faculty served as volunteers. For about 30 minutes, we played the game. Players lined up on the right side of the conference room.

We began with steps forward for the blind student. He quickly moved ahead through cards that offered him bonuses for support and outreach to campus resources. Our student in the wheelchair (a veteran faculty member) quickly became frustrated. She wasn't moving ahead toward the goal of graduation, symbolized by the mortarboard on the left side of the room. The audience started chiming in: "The student lost her backpack! That happened to one of my students this semester." The audience jumped in, especially keen to support the "students" and offering advice when they drew cards that created crossroads. We even had one student ask to move ahead a bit further than the audience recommended! The audience supported her, feeling for the student facing all the challenges outlined in her cards.

In sum, the game resulted in one student touching the mortarboard and winning the game. The crowd was inspired by the exercise. At the start of our session, folks remained silent, listening to our slide overview of the principles of universal design. By the time we ended the game and opened the floor to questions, participants were lively and asked provocative questions about UD, policy, and challenges in supporting students on our campuses.

As an outcome, the faculty identified UD principles and how they could be used in assisting students and managing their classrooms. From the feedback and numerous questions at the end of the session, the faculty expressed the ability to identify student challenges and determine how UD practices could benefit all students in their classes. Specifically, their questions included everything from how to support students with respect to classroom layout: "How do we organize our classroom so that all students can see the instructors? How do we keep the chair reserved for disabled students from being used by other students? Where can we go to have our materials closed-captioned? Where do we find out about how the Americans with Disabilities Act applies to students?"

Conclusion

The success of the UD Game encouraged us to continue this method of professional development in raising awareness of UD principles and best practices at CNM. In our upcoming academic year, we will offer our game again at Faculty Focus Day, our opening professional development event at the College. After this presentation, we made a few modifications. Moderators will clarify that the audience must determine the number of steps backward or forwards based on the student's crossroad decision. That is, some cards

require the “student” player to make a decision as to what they would do under the circumstances presented by the card. The audience then “judges” this decision, rewarding a good decision with steps forward or a poor decision with steps (or rolling) backward.

We feel strongly in modeling the behavior that reflects the most effective practices for universal design in professional development. A multi-modal approach to faculty training allows for a more interactive experience that encourages engagement with UD principles on a personal level. Many of our faculty members only interact with information about students’ disabilities when a student presents an ADA accommodation letter. The game is a way to encourage dialogue about how UD practices can alleviate some of the challenges students with disabilities face in their classes. We invite others to use this game to promote campus understanding of challenges students with disabilities face and how the universal design framework can be used as a tool for student engagement and success.

References

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Appendix

“Visually Impaired” Game Cards

<p>You get a note-taker who hands you a stack of handwritten notes. Take two steps back.</p>	<p>The early bird gets the worm and a seat on the Sun Van. You need to be ready by 6 am for a 9 am class, but you end up sleeping in. Take two steps back.</p>
<p>You have “Non-24,” a sleep cycle disturbance, and you become exhausted. Take one step back.</p>	<p>You meet with your DRC counselor and instructors for the upcoming semester. Modifications are made that will allow you to succeed in your courses. Take three steps forward.</p>
<p>Your DRC counselor finds a screen reader for you that you find easy to use. Take three steps forward.</p>	<p>You find help at the tutoring center. They make manipulatives that aid in your learning. Take two steps forward.</p>
<p>Your instructor plans assessments that effectively measure your learning without discriminating against your disability. Take two steps forward.</p>	<p>An instructor refuses to email assignments and notes to you. You have difficulty accessing this information. Take two steps back.</p>
<p>Your math instructor does not provide alternate means of assessment. It is difficult for you to demonstrate your knowledge of the subject. Take one step back.</p>	<p>Your instructor uses supplemental videos for your course. Although you can hear the audio, the video is not described. Take one step back.</p>
<p>You form a study group with other members of your class. The support is amazing! Take two steps forward.</p>	<p>Your note-taker does not transcribe your responses correctly, and you have no way to check them. You miss points unnecessarily. Take one step back.</p>
<p>You meet with your instructor in office hours, and discover that you’re doing better than you thought. Take one step forward.</p>	<p>You find that you can use an open source e-book for your class. Save money, and have an accessible text! Take two steps forward.</p>
<p>Your instructor describes the graphics shown to the class in lectures. You understand what is going on! Take two steps forward.</p>	<p>You find a medication that works for your “Non-24.” To sleep, perchance to dream... Take 3 steps forward.</p>

“Psychiatric Disorder” Game Cards

<p>Congratulations! You won the Lottery! (Scholarship, that is). Pays for your tuition, but not books. Take two steps forward.</p>	<p>The Early Bird gets the worm, and a seat on the Sun Van. Be ready by 6 am to get to your 9 am class. Take a nap on the van, and one step back.</p>
<p>Uh-oh! You're a statistic! Your car is stolen, along with your textbooks and laptop. Take three steps back.</p>	<p>Bummer! A hold was placed on your financial aid, and all your classes were dropped. Take three steps back.</p>
<p>Way to Go! You passed all your classes, and you keep your scholarship. Take two steps forward.</p>	<p>Your medication stops working. You fall into a depressed state. What do you do?</p>
<p>Work, family and school commitments seem overwhelming! You drop all your classes. Take three steps back.</p>	<p>You discover that you have AD/HD, and find appropriate therapies. Your grades and relationships improve. Take three steps forward.</p>
<p>You join a study group at school. The support is amazing! Take two steps forward.</p>	<p>You have problems getting to sleep at night. You miss your early morning classes frequently. Take two steps back.</p>
<p>Your new job pays more, but the schedule conflicts with one of your classes. Take two steps forward and one step back.</p>	<p>“He Who Must Not Be Named” tells you that you’ll never make it. What do you do?</p>
<p>You meet with your instructor in office hours, and discover that you’re doing better than you thought. Take one step forward.</p>	<p>You miss several deadlines for a class. Rather than talk to the instructor about possible options, you drop the class. Take two steps back.</p>
<p>You have a panic attack and miss three days of school. What do you do?</p>	<p>You have a custody hearing with your ex. You lose custody of your children. What do you do?</p>
<p>Your instructor helps you figure out how you learn most effectively. Your grades soar! Take three steps forward.</p>	<p>You are on top of the world! You register for 18 hours of classes. Take three steps forward.</p>

“Mobility Impairment” Game Cards

<p>Congratulations! You won the Lottery! (Scholarship, that is). Pays for your tuition, but not books. Roll forward 3 feet.</p>	<p>The first day of classes, you can't find the appropriate access point to the buildings. You're late! Roll back 2 feet.</p>
<p>Your specially-equipped van breaks down. You are unable to get to class for a week. What do you do?</p>	<p>You get in touch with DRC, and get an access map. You can get to all your classes now! Roll forward 3 feet.</p>
<p>Way to Go! You passed all your classes, and you keep your scholarship. Roll forward 3 feet.</p>	<p>Workstudy funds run out. You no longer have enough money to pay for DSL at home. Roll back 2 feet.</p>
<p>Your teacher helps you figure out how you learn most effectively. Your grades soar! Roll forward 5 feet.</p>	<p>You discover that you have AD/HD, and find appropriate therapies. Your grades and relationships improve. Roll forward 5 feet.</p>
<p>Your teacher gives you clearly defined assignments and rubrics. Knowing what is expected of you, you rise to the occasion and get an A. Roll forward two feet.</p>	<p>Your teacher uses supplemental videos for your course that are closed-captioned. You have three modes of “input.” Roll forward 3 feet.</p>
<p>Your new job pays more, but the schedule conflicts with one of your classes, so you must drop it. Roll three feet forward and two feet back.</p>	<p>Your parents have always told you that you're a loser. You get the flu and miss a week of school. What do you do?</p>
<p>You meet with your instructor in office hours, and discover that you're doing better than you thought. Roll two feet forward.</p>	<p>Bummer! A hold was placed on your financial aid, and all your classes were dropped. What do you do?</p>
<p>You share with your instructor that you have difficulty hearing. She makes sure to face you when speaking to the class, and asks you to sit closer to the front. Roll two feet forward.</p>	<p>You tell the DRC that you would like to take a laboratory class. They find an accessible classroom and appropriate section for you. Roll forward 3 feet.</p>
<p>Your instructor helps you figure out how you learn most effectively. Your grades soar! Roll three feet forward.</p>	

“Hearing Impaired” Game Cards

<p>Congratulations! You won the Lottery! (Scholarship, that is). Pays for your tuition, but not books. Take two steps forward.</p>	<p>Your interpreter doesn't show up for your first day of class. You feel lost. What do you do?</p>
<p>Your car breaks down. You are unable to get to class for a week. What do you do?</p>	<p>You get into a custody dispute with your ex. This causes stress, and some of the required court dates cause you to miss class. Take three steps back.</p>
<p>Way to Go! You passed all your classes, and you keep your scholarship. Take two steps forward.</p>	<p>Workstudy funds run out. You no longer have enough money to pay for DSL at home. Take one step back.</p>
<p>You find a mentorship program at school in your field of study. Transfer assistance and internship opportunities abound! Take two steps forward.</p>	<p>You discover that you have AD/HD, and find appropriate therapies. Your grades and relationships improve. Take three steps forward.</p>
<p>You begin to take advantage of the free tutoring services offered at school. Your grades improve. Take two steps forward.</p>	<p>Your backpack with your books and notes is stolen. Some of the materials are not replaceable. Take two steps back.</p>
<p>Your new job pays more, but the schedule conflicts with one of your classes and you must drop it. Take two steps forward and one step back.</p>	<p>Your parents have always told you that you're a loser. You get the flu and miss a week of school. What do you do?</p>
<p>You meet with your instructor in office hours, and discover that you're doing better than you thought. Take two steps forward.</p>	<p>Bummer! A hold was placed on your financial aid, and all your classes were dropped. What do you do?</p>
<p>You share with your instructor that you have difficulty hearing. She makes sure to face you when speaking to the class, and asks you to sit closer to the front. Take two steps forward.</p>	<p>You tell the DRC that you would like to take a laboratory class. They find interpreters and an appropriate section for you. Take two steps forward.</p>
<p>Your instructor helps you figure out how you learn most effectively. Your grades soar! Take three steps forward.</p>	<p>You become depressed and start missing class. You can't keep up with the material on your own. Take two steps back.</p>