

Universal Design in Assessments

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In the fall of 2002, a decision was made to begin infusing some strategies of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) from the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST, 2008) into a group of freshman seminar courses at Bristol Community College. By utilizing UDL strategies (multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement), an effort was made to present the courses and course work in a user friendly manner for all students, regardless of the students' life experiences or abilities.

CASE STUDY

In the freshman course I taught, College Success Seminar, students were given the opportunity to express what they learned throughout the semester in a way that was in alignment with their learning strengths and preferences. The final exam (worth 30% of their final grade) would not be based on, nor hindered by, their ability to write, their creativity, how well they could memorize, or their ability to perform under time constraints.

A goal set each semester for this course was to incorporate a variety of activities that required different learning styles, including

- Captioned videos for those who may learn better by reading or the combination of reading and hearing. This also assists those who are deaf by allowing them to fully access the information without the need for retrofitting.
- Varied assessments (written, verbal, role playing, etc.) that offered students with differing strengths of expression to fully convey to their instructor what they learned.
- Opportunities for reflection such as journaling, verbal expression, recordings, and self-assessments.
- Written information or instructions matched up with audio, allowing for fuller, greater access to the course material.

For the final exam, students were asked to utilize their primary learning style(s)/strengths (which they had identified earlier in the course) to express or represent three pieces of course content they learned during the semester. One month prior to the end of the semester, students were given the following information about their final exam.

Using your primary learning style or styles, (see unit three) demonstrate three significant pieces of course content you learned from this course. Examples of how you may demonstrate what you have learned may include, but are not limited to:

- *an essay,*
- *a poster board (that you can assemble, take a picture of and post),*
- *a video recording (you can work with the eLearning lab on how to post a video),*
- *an audio recording (you can work with the eLearning lab on how to post a recording),*
- *a prearranged phone call to me, or*
- *any combination of the above.*

You may come up with an unlisted way to express what you know, but if you decide to do so, please let me know in advance.

After receiving this information, students were asked to reflect on the activity as part of their discussion question for the week. In particular, students were asked to respond to the following:

Have you ever had an opportunity to decide how you want to present what you have learned? What are your thoughts about this type of assignment as a final exam? Tell us if you think this decision will make your final exam assignment easier, more difficult, or no difference, and why.

What are two significant course concepts that you or your classmates could focus on for this assignment?

Feedback from students was mostly positive. The majority of students had never experienced the opportunity to “make up” a final exam. Over the past decade, in my classes, students have taken advantage of this opportunity for multiple means of expression, including essays, poster boards, phone calls, face-to-face meetings, PowerPoint slides, poems, video, word searches, and photographs. Students tend to take this assignment very seriously and always find unique ways to use their learning style and strengths to express what they have learned.

However, one or two students per semester say they do not like this assignment for several reasons: they would like more guidance, they do not feel they are creative, they fear they will be tested on their creativity, they are good test takers and just want to be tested in a traditional manner. An instructor can work with those who have misgivings and assist them by addressing their concerns. For example, one semester a student wanted to be assessed on her knowledge through the traditional testing format. For this student, a suggestion was made that she review the course material covered over the semester, write an exam and then provide the answers to the exam. The student was delighted with this idea and was able to utilize her strengths to recognize and pull out important information from the course, question the information, and then provide responses to those questions.

To provide guidance regarding this assignment and to inform students how they will be graded, students were given a rubric (Rubric for Final Project) to review and an opportunity to ask questions in case some part of the assignment was unclear.

Rubric for Final Project

Criterion	A-level qualities (90–100)	B-level qualities (80–89)	C-level qualities (70-79)	F-level qualities (below 70)
Purpose	Introduces and presents three items effectively and clearly; information learned is readily apparent to the reader.	Introduces and presents fewer than three items effectively and clearly and/or information learned is readily apparent to the reader.	Introduces and presents items learned somewhat effectively; presentation has a clear purpose but may sometimes digress from it.	Introduces and presents information poorly; purpose is generally unclear.
Development and content	Develops presentation with exceptional care, including all three topics; provides a balanced presentation of relevant information of each item learned and shows a thoughtful, in-depth analysis of the topics; reader gains insights.	Develops presentation with exceptional care, but included fewer than three topics and/or information displays a clear analysis of the significant topics; reader gains some insights.	Does not fully develop presentation as assigned; analysis is basic or general; reader gains few insights.	Presentation is undeveloped and/or does not relate to the assignment and includes very little discussion of the issues discussed in the course; analysis is vague or not evident; reader is confused or may be misinformed.
Cohesion and insight	Ideas are supported effectively; student shows clear evidence of having understood and synthesized three course concepts; the demonstration of knowledge is exceptional.	Ideas are generally supported; student shows evidence of having read, understood, and correctly applied the course concepts; demonstration of knowledge is clear.	Many ideas are unsupported and it may not be clear whether the student has understood or synthesized the concepts; demonstration of knowledge is incomplete.	Presentation is incoherent and shows little or no insight; there is no evidence that the student has understood course concepts.

CONCLUSION

Applying universal design in the classroom has the potential to increase the chance that all students will have opportunities to learn, participate, and express what they know (Burgstahler & Coy, 2008). The activity described in this article allows students to demonstrate to their instructors what they have learned in a way that best matches their learning styles and strengths. Although this approach (variable means of assessment) will not work for all courses, if applied intentionally, may work for many. A question often asked

when this activity is proposed is “how do I fairly grade twenty-five different types of assessments?” The answer to this important question consistently includes: through the use of a carefully thought out and well planned, easy-to-understand rubric. Although the instructor may have many different types of assessment presentations to review, she reviews them based on one set of standards. In using this method of assessment, they are able to evaluate “what” students have learned in class rather than how well students write, take tests, or perform in other specific ways.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

As I worked through my dissertation “Principles of Universal Design for Learning: What is the value of UDL training on accessible pedagogy”, I learned that the more one knows about the principles of universal design, the more one tends to proactively consider the needs of students (Poore-Pariseau, 2011). There is a double outcome of applying universal design: it improves learning opportunities for all students and to encourages instructors to consider the needs of students with disabilities who may be in their classrooms.

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