40 Supporting International Students Using UDL
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Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that is applied to curriculum development, assessment, and teaching and learning strategies. It aims to enhance the learning experiences of all students by creating a flexible learning environment (Cornell University, 2022). Adapted from the more general principles of Universal Design, UDL in the sphere of education promotes learning that is open and accessible to all, without the need for specific accommodations for individual learners.

What is Universal Design for Learning?

Realising that a one-size-fits-all approach in education is not possible, CAST (2018) created a framework that recognises the diversity in learning communities and the challenges of meeting the needs of all learners. The framework consists of three principles, with accompanying guidelines that can be implemented in an educational context to create a more inclusive learning environment:

- Multiple means of Representation: sharing information in a variety of formats so that a learner can choose their preferred mode to access the material;

- Multiple means of action and expression: creating opportunities for learners to adapt materials in order to access them more fully, as well as allowing opportunities for learners to demonstrate their learning in more than one way, and interact with learning materials;

- Multiple means of engagement: identifying ways to motivate learners as well as developing autonomy as learners (CAST, 2018).

The need to support students with recognised disabilities or learning difficulties is well recognised and specific accommodations are provided to help them participate fully in university life. However, many learners from the wider student community also face learning challenges that can impact on their success. The benefits of making the learning environment more accessible for students with recognised disabilities or learning difficulties will also apply to the wider learning community.

Challenges facing international students

The application of UDL within higher education also offers benefits for international students who travel to Ireland to continue their education. Each of these students has a variety of needs and if supported, they can enjoy a rich and fulfilling educational experience abroad.

Although they have demonstrated competence in the language by achieving the standard required to study within our education system students still encounter challenges as they develop confidence and fluency in the target language. Additionally, they may experience challenges as they settle into a new culture and learning environment which can impact on their academic success. Academic work in their new place of study may be very different from practices in their home university.

The application of UDL would enhance the educational experiences of these students, while at the same time support all students undertaking the same programme (Burgstahler, 2013).

Academic skills

Academic literacy is a complex skill which students are expected to demonstrate to prove successful learning (Henderson & Whitelaw, 2013). International students often struggle with different academic practices in their new learning environment. This is particularly true in a new educational context which is very different to their own, where the application of critical thinking and referencing are often viewed in a very different manner (Henderson and Whitelaw 2013). Research has shown that students can be assisted by the provision of explicit learning strategies, which they can apply to their own learning (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006). This will also help them become more autonomous learners, a necessary characteristic of third level students.

The role of UDL

Multiple means of representation requires content material to be shared in a variety of formats, thus allowing the students to choose the medium that is best for their comprehension of the content. For example, a reading text may be the common support material shared, but a video allows them to hear the information, and view associated images. Students can review what they might have missed in a lecture or use the video for revision. Other examples include clarifying vocabulary through glossaries or ensuring students see the connection to background knowledge, or previous content.

Multiple means of action and expression allows students to do something with the content to make it more meaningful to them. Being able to alter the font and background colour of a document or create an audio file from a text can make material more accessible. Knowing how to use tools such as spell checkers, or providing writing scaffolds such as planners, assessment scaffolds, and sentence starters can help students demonstrate what they have learnt. The use of assessment choice may sometimes (but not always) be appropriate and could also be considered, keeping in mind that whatever the format, the same learning outcomes must be assessed. Providing feedback in both written and audio format also provides choice in how the student engages with responses to their assessment.

Multiple means of expression allows various methods to be used to stimulate interest, and motivate the learner, leading towards a more independent and autonomous learner. Students might work in groups, collaborating and sharing expertise. Planners and calendars allow them to becomes skilled in time management while scaffolds offer support in completing learning activites.

Examples of using UDL to meet needs international students in HE

Table 1 (on page 98) provides some examples of UDL approaches that could be adopted to support international students in a new learning environment. Strategies such as these will also assist all students in the learning group, creating a positive and supportive learning environment for the whole class.

Conclusion

The use of UDL creates a flexible learning environment, with more student-centred learning opportunities. This approach encourages students to become more involved in their own learning, leading to more success.

References

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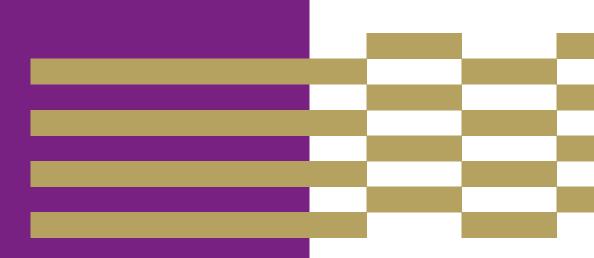
Table 1: Examples of UDL to solve international student problems but also assist and all students

Area	Need of international student	DL solution	Benefits of all students
Multiple means of Representation			
Lectures	Difficult to take in lecture content.	Make screencasts with captions of main points of lecture.	Students can review content in their own time, as often as they want, focusing on areas of difficulty.
	Unable to transfer learning or connect to previous knowledge.	Connect prior learning by recap and summary; identify key and critical points in content.	Students begin to see the connections between the different aspects of the content.
Multiple means of Action & Expression			
Class Participation	Unfamiliar with topics to be covered in class and reluctant to take part in class activities.	Identify weekly topics using collapsed topics on Moodle to alert students of next topic to be covered in class so they can prepare before class.	Students can be prepared before the session, and are more able to participate in class activities and discussions.
Feedback	Students are not aware of meaning of feedback.	Provide feedback in different formats that can be accessible to students.	Students can access feedback in format that is meaningful to them.
Multiple means of Engagement			
Independent study	Unfamiliar with setting own goals.	Suggest amount of time per week for course study.	Students can get an idea of how to allocate time for individual study.
	Reading load is heavy, unsure what to look for in an article.	Provide guide questions for reading.	Students know what to focus on when reading.