
Changing thinking about disability: Why is it such a big deal?

On the one hand AHEAD is actively promoting the idea of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) which is an **idea elastic enough to fit every kid** (Rose, Harvard Education Magazine 2014). We are talking to colleagues in HEI about it, organising training sessions and summer schools and the idea is growing. In higher education, staff working in disability support services feel the pinch. They understand that given the rising numbers of students and a shrinking pot of funding to provide supports, the way forward has to include the mainstream, and responsibility for including these students has to be shared with faculty staff, placement staff, careers and libraries. After all, every student learns differently and we know that one size cannot fit all, so the greater flexibility that is built into mainstream provision, then the less need there will be for add on supports for students with a disability. This is not to say that many students will not require individual supports - they will - but it is to locate responsibility for inclusion across the whole institution. UDL is an excellent framework for support staff to become more inclusive of a diversity of students in higher education and to create inclusive learning spaces.

This approach is visionary and forwardlooking, but on the ground some policies are extremely difficult to shift. After all, we are still having the same conversation about examinations and what is a reasonable accommodation that we were having 20 years ago.

There is still considerable resistance to giving a student extra time to complete an examination. Why is this? Why is giving a student with an information processing difficulty 10 minutes extra in a critical exam such as the Leaving Cert such a big deal? Why do students need to prove beyond any shadow of a doubt that their condition is below specific percentiles in writing or reading in order to be granted extra time? After all, what is the examination actually assessing? Is it assessing their speed writing or their knowledge and ability to answer a question? According to Dr. Nicole Offesh

All the time in the world is no good if the student does not know the answer. Extended time in an examination for students who need it does make a difference and is related to their disability. (NADP conference Manchester July 2015)

This particular conversation about extra time in exams to accommodate students with disabilities has been going on for years and it is tiring.

It is time to change this view of disability and move on from the medical model which locates the problem in the student rather than in the design of the learning environment. It is time to challenge this thinking and design assessments that are fair to all students and aim to assess the ability and knowledge of the student, not their speed of execution. Everyone wants to ensure the tests are fair to all students and everyone wants to maintain the robust integrity of the examinations, but there are many ways for students to demonstrate what they know including using computers and having additional time.

Within a UDL way of thinking there are multiple ways for a student to show what they know and we would like UDL to be considered as an appropriate framework within which to explore the concept of reasonable accommodations in examinations in the upcoming review by the State Examinations Commission.

September, 2015



Ann Heelan

UniversalDesignforLearning.ie

Ann Heelan is a consultant on Inclusive Education Practice and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for all students. Originally a teacher and then CEO of AHEAD for 20 Years, she has a track record of working in collaboration with national and international organisations to improve the opportunities and rights of students with disabilities in education. She has written on topics such as "Building Inclusive Learning Spaces," "Getting Started with UDL," "Inclusive Study Abroad," "Accessible Assessment," "Developing your UDL Practice," and "Building Communities of UDL Practice."

In her role in AHEAD, Ann established learning networks with staff in further and higher education, to support them to work together to make their practice more inclusive of students with disabilities. She was the winner of the Miriam Van Acker Award for Innovation in Inclusive Education in 2017, which recognises leadership in promoting inclusive practice for students with disabilities in tertiary education and employment.

Since 2020 she has been working with SOLAS on behalf of AHEAD to research and write the SOLAS publication on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for FET which SOLAS are due to be published in early in 2021.

She now runs a [Consultancy Service supporting staff in tertiary education](#) to get started and reduce the barriers for individual students and to develop UDL practice across the institution.

This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit www.ahead.ie/journal for more information
