
Exploring the Student Voice within Universal Design for Learning Work

Introduction and context

One of the reasons that makes Universal Design for Learning (UDL) particularly appealing to the post-secondary sector is the fact that it is entirely focused on the design reflection of the instructor, and does not require diagnostic information about individual students (Gradel & Edson, 2009). Unlike differentiation which normally unfolds when a teacher is faced with the specific needs of learners in their class, the reflection around UDL can occur in the abstract, before an instructor ever meets a class (Novak Educational Consultancy, 2018). This is enormously freeing, and particularly congenial to the post-secondary sector where lecturers may never have the opportunity over the course of a semester to uncover their students' diversity. Instead, one can hypothesize about barriers and remove proactively with the use of inclusive design (Rose, Harbour, Johnston, Daley & Abarbanell, 2006). This, however, also creates a significant danger: the possibility that UDL now becomes conceptualized with no consideration for the student voice. **This paper will examine three dimensions which make the learner voice essential in the UDL process. It is a call to action, which encourages UDL advocates to carefully consider re-centering UDL implementation in higher education (HE) on the student voice.** It is indeed crucial that it does not lose an essential part of its flavour and intentions, by dismissing an essential stakeholder.

Overview of the literature

Clearly the notions of accessibility and inclusive design are central the concept of UDL. Though this is implicitly understood, very little of the current literature on UDL in post-secondary actively explores this dimension or enunciates how the student voice might contribute to this design (or redesign) work (McLeod, 2011).

There is also an assumption in higher education that the lecture format does not offer instructors an opportunity to genuinely establish rapport with their students or to explore their diversity. The literature instead encourage instructors to be sensitive to and aware of learner diversity in a global and conceptual way, but it does not place any expectations on them to explore diagnoses, cognitive diversity or even personal circumstances and context that might be affecting their learning (Dreher, 2009). The assumption is that student services will be more equipped to play that role throughout the duration of the learner's degree.

The post-secondary sector, furthermore, functions on the assumption that students may be reticent to share and disclose. Support and accommodations are dependent on the learner's choice to request services and are systematically conceptualized as delivered outside the class (Hassel & Ridout, 2017). This reinforces the instructor's belief that inclusive design must remain a unilateral and mostly abstract process.

Finally, while the literature on learner voice is now fairly well developed, it has been mostly framed around the K-12 sector (pre third level education). Critical Pedagogy is perhaps the only area which actively discusses incorporating the learner voice as part of post-secondary teaching (Breunig, 2009) but it is fair to say that this remains a minority discourse within the higher education landscape (Couldry, 2010).

UDL literature at present mostly makes abstraction of the student voice. It focuses mainly on offering the instructor a lens through which to carry out a systemic examination of instruction and assessment on the basis of accessibility (Pace & Schwarz, 2008). This is striking since inclusive design in other fields, such as manufacturing or architecture, almost always presupposes a degree of ethnographic work with users. This is where the notion of user experience (UX) becomes crucial (Nagalingam & Ibrahim, 2015), but to date there is little focus on UX within the HE classroom (Sapio, Nicolo & Papa, 2017). Instead, much of the literature on the implementation of UDL now focuses on either the buy-in or the resistance of educators, not the perceptions of students (Izzo, Murray & Novak, 2008; Anstead, 2016).

Methodological reflection

This article approaches its themes and suggestions through the lens of phenomenology (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). I am currently faculty within an Education department but have also, in the past, been the manager of an accessibility centre on another campus. I also continue to act as a UDL consultant to colleges and universities. I draw from these multiple roles and this professional experience in my analysis of current challenges faced by UDL advocates when exploring the student voice. My subjective experience of the milieu and of UDL implementation work is central to my analysis and I embrace my own positioning within the topic area I investigate here. I am also drawing from a discussion corner, which took place during the 2018 AHEAD Conference, in which I participated.

Observations

Developing ethnographic dispositions as instructors

Clearly UDL will need to evolve as a field and come to integrate the notion of UX if it is to remain relevant and aligned with the objectives of inclusive design (IDRU, 2018). UX thus far has not been a popular concept in higher education. One of the issues is that UX presumes a use and an understanding of ethnography (Weber & Cheng, 2013). UX is gauged and documented through a consistent and fluid use of ethnographic tools and methods with the user population. The field of education has been reluctant to embrace an ethnographic approach to the learner. This approach can open up certain experiences during group research that other research methods fail to cover. Educators, for the most part, remain oddly convinced learners are not best placed to assess and verbalize their needs in pedagogical content and format. The assumption is that the instructor, as expert, will be better equipped to determine how to address learner expectations and wants. Interestingly, when ethnography is embraced in the classroom, it is usually auto-ethnography practised by the teacher, rather than an exploration of the learner voice (Dressman, 2006; Trahar, 2009).

Overcoming power dynamics and ethical hurdles

Part of the reason why teachers have such difficulties adopting ethnographic methods in the classroom is probably that classrooms remain inherently spaces where power dynamics are omnipresent (Sidky, 2017). Despite recent transformations, HE classrooms are still inevitably rife with hierarchical structure and inequitable power dynamics. UDL cannot be developed without a significant amount of reflection first occurring around these inequities. Even when instructors are keen use ethnographic methods to gauge UX, it will be difficult to achieve this sort of exploration and to get students to genuinely and authentically share their perspective without taking into account the hierarchical concerns students will have internalized. In a recent study on the discrepancy between the

discourse of faculties of education around UDL and their inclusive in-class practices (Fovet, 2016), after careful ethical consideration it was determined that the only way to obtain genuine and earnest feedback from students was to entirely delegate interviewing to the students themselves as research stakeholders. This created a full cloak of anonymity for students, and allowed them to discuss UDL openly – both opportunities and hurdles – without having to worry about instructors perceptions of their feedback.

Establishing collaborative relationships with the student body within UDL promotion

There has thus far been very little literature focusing on the strategic implementation of UDL on HE campuses (Fovet, in print). There are certainly numerous communities of practice focusing on UDL that have flourished across universities, and faculty have, in places, begun the process of exploring how UDL supports them in redesigning courses and assessment for greater accessibility (Stewart, 2017). Despite these encouraging developments, though, few campuses have succeeded in developing a strategic approach to campus wide implementation (Comfort & North, 2014). UDL remains a mostly individual choice for instructors and departments, and studies have yet to emerge on how such efforts might be scaled up to a whole campus dimension. Management of change has not been appropriately explored in this respect; nor has the implementation of UDL been examined within the relative complexity of the HE organizational lens.

One striking repercussion of this lack of systemic reflection on large scale implementation is the absence of work around collaboration with the student body. As main stakeholders in this process of change, the student body will need to be actively involved and engaged. When I was involved in the implementation of UDL as the director of an accessibility service, I designed a workshop for students which was meant to introduce the student body to the notion of UDL and to encourage participants to become active partners in the scaling up of UDL efforts (Beck, Diaz del Castillo, Fovet, Mole & Noga, 2014). This is an effective first step, but campuses also need to proactively involve student unions, and create political goodwill from the student body at large, around the process. The student body must gain ownership over UDL and contribute to the flavour of its development within the landscape of each campus. There is considerable work that needs to occur in this area and a significant shift in mindset must take place. Indeed the units which normally lead the UDL implementation drive, such as accessibility offices, usually have very little expertise in effective relationship building with student unions. Such work requires specific know-how and a delicate set of skills (Herdlein & Zurner, 2015); campuses need to reflect on how best to develop these skills among the personnel which decide to lead UDL work across their institution.

Outcomes and discussion

UDL must move rapidly towards a reflection on practice that consistently and proactively integrates the learner voice. While instructors can hypothesize about barriers and work to remove them, they will have to elaborate ways to understand the learner perspective ethnographically so that their design reflection can become meaningful and aligned with UX, rather than crystalized as a mere teacher-centered reflection. There are conceivably barriers to learning which instructors do not identify or cannot foresee.

UDL has progressed rapidly in HE over the past decade. It will need, as a field of literature, to reflect not just on design but more importantly on the inherent power dynamics which plague the post-secondary landscape. In this respect, it will become increasingly important to erase the delineations between UDL and Critical Pedagogy in

order to ensure that UDL remains politically relevant for learners. UDL will also need to tap into the 'decolonizing the curriculum' movement (Le Grange, 2016). The first step for the UDL movement to embrace this unavoidable political dimension is for it to proactively home in on the learner voice (Andjelkovic, 2017). Emergent work on this issue shows promise (Di Penta, Barga & Pulsifer, 2017) and this avenue of reflection and research must now become central within the UDL movement.

Part of the reflection that needs to occur within the UDL movement around power will inevitably lead to a reconsideration of how UDL implementation should occur. The strategic implementation of UDL across campuses has thus far strikingly ignored students as stakeholders. It will be impossible to promote UDL on campuses if a significant effort is not made to involve the student body as stakeholder. This involvement could take the shape of workshops and information sessions, but will need to eventually grow in scope; it will require the involvement of student unions, and will eventually need to incorporate full and formal consultation of the student body in order to identify campus-specific variables that need to be taken into account in the way UDL is unrolled.

There is perhaps a wider reflection to carry out here: even the most social justice focused theoretical frameworks run the danger of maturing into mere checklists if they lose sight of their original objectives. UDL is an inclusive lens, but it will lose relevance unless it is able to evolve and retain a genuine and fresh focus on the main stakeholder in the equation: learners. Any design reflection must be foremost a vehicle for the voice of the user, and UDL must find a way to systematically integrate this perspective through everyday processes of classroom ethnography.

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